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## Towards a Materialist Rationalism: Plato, Hegel, Badiou

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### Abstract

In this paper I assess Badiou's proposal for a third epoch of the dialectic, in relation to its first two great moments with Plato and Hegel. I first show how Badiou argues for a rationalist materialism, by reactivating the two central Platonic distinctions between truth and *doxa*, and between reality and appearances. I argue that Badiou's ontologization of the intelligibility of mathematical forms renders the connection between thought and reality problematic. I then show his attempts to overcome this 'connection problem' in two steps. First, following Hegel, by rendering the transcendence of being with respect to thought immanent to thought itself; second, following Lacan, by flattening the distinction between thought and being through the *matheme*. I show that this results in a variant of the Parmenidean thesis for the identity of being and thought, this time marking their difference as a formal distinction, real but non-ontological.

I finally show that, at a loss for any representationalist account as to how to determine which multiplicities are real or actual, Badiou surrenders real differences to formal distinctions for which any qualitative specification will do, without further methodological criteria. More dramatically, at a loss for such epistemological criteria, Badiou's thesis that mathematics is ontology becomes mortgaged to a gratuitous ur-decision which supposes a philosophical subject, without which the dialectic between being and event becomes impossible. I conclude that these attempts ultimately vitiate the coordination of rationalism and materialism in Badiou's dialectical enterprise, surrendering it to a kind of idealism instead.

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## Introduction

Alain Badiou's greatest contribution to philosophy is perhaps his unflinching declaration that philosophy is possible (Badiou 2008: 21). No longer sedated by the spectre of a critique exacerbated to the point of leading every philosophical pretence into an abyss, Badiou dares to affirm that philosophy is alive and not in a slumbering march towards its self-annihilation. Yet the return of philosophy proper, Badiou tells us, ought to take place on condition that we find a new sequence for the dialectical method, after the completion of its first two great moments with Plato and Hegel. In *Logics of Worlds*, the third possible moment of the dialectic wages against the ubiquity of "democratic materialism" and announces itself, this time with Marx, finally under the name of a "materialist dialectic" (Badiou 2009a). Philosophy is identified with dialectical thought to cut diagonally through the common conceptual currency of its time, against both its 'dull' end in the hands of an analytic nihilism that tethers Truth to a doctrine of judgment, and its 'pathetic' end in the name of the end of metaphysics (Badiou 2004: 69). Assuming this inherently revolutionary role is, within philosophy, accomplished by aligning the concept of Truth with the production of novelty across the different conditions of its time in politics, art, love and science.

Yet the concept of Truth can only satisfy this requirement by way of a theoretical endeavor that is not merely subordinated to the ready-made categorical oppositions from the languages that surround it (Badiou 2004: 69). In this regard, Badiou writes:

"I think that the fundamental problem in the philosophical field today is to find something like a new logic. We cannot today begin by some considerations about politics, life, creation, or action. We cannot find in all that a true beginning for

philosophy. We must first describe a new logic, a new way of thinking, and finally a new definition of philosophy itself. More precisely we must find a new dialectics” (Badiou 2012a: 1).

The identification with dialectics with a logic here pertains to the rationalist core of Badiou’s project (Brassier 2010). As the movement of thought proper to the dialectical method, logic is here understood in the Hegelian sense in terms of which one articulates a transparent discourse that adjudicates on rational grounds between what is and what is not. In doing so, dialectics refuses the hypostasis of the irrational or the mystical proper to all forms of sophistry, including its post-modern guise, which, as Quentin Meillassoux develops, sets in motion a Ptolemaic counter-revolution incipient in modern philosophy (Meillassoux 2008). Badiou’s resolve is therefore unmistakably modern in its attempt to find an alternative path for the dialectic beyond the contemporary radicalization of negativity (Adorno), or the demotion of the negative in the name of a ‘Spinozist’ avowal of affirmation (Negri) (Badiou 2012a: 3). Facing a so-called ‘crisis of the negative’, in its dialectical sublimation or its anti-dialectical denunciation, Badiou’s materialist dialectic proposes in turn to rehabilitate the powers of the negative as the mark of the philosophical ambition towards Truth. For it is the negative that empowers thought to differentiate itself, to bring itself forth or to make itself explicit in the rule-governed transparency of a discourse. At the same time the discriminatory power enabled by the negative presupposes in turn form of affirmation that grounds it: “We have to try to understand exactly the conditions under which we may still have anything like the possibility of concrete negation. I believe this can only be realized in the field of primitive affirmation, for something that is primitively affirmative and not negative” (Badiou 2012a: 3). It is finally the wager of a subjective *decision* that grounds the possibility of rational *adjudication*. But what is the nature of this ‘subjective decision’ on whose basis one becomes situated within philosophy, and thereby gripped by the dialectical order of reasons in the name of Truth?

In the first instance, the answer seems clearly delineated in the basic dialectic that informs Badiou's system, in terms of the difference between *being* and the *event*. The precedence of affirmative decision over negative differentiation designates thus the means through which thought claims for itself the capacity to break with what there is; to *subtract* thinking from the objectivity of the present, to interrupt the (ideological) prescriptions of its time, and set itself in the creative task of inaugurating a new time. The subjectivity of decision here grounds the possibility of the event, and the subsequent initiation of a new truth-procedure. Yet this line of explanation runs counter to Badiou's overt declaration that philosophy has no events proper; it produces no Truths of its own. If so, then what sense is there in saying that the philosophical dialectics requires, in every case, a fundamental act of affirmation? In what sense can we speak of a subjective decision there where we are told subjectivation is not possible? What, then, does Badiou's philosophical *ur-decision* exactly involve, in declaring the existence of philosophy under the rationalist demand of the dialectic, against the ubiquity of historicist hermeneutics, the saturation of thought to language, and the post-modern call for philosophy's dissolution? What must it decide, and how can it do so, in order to fulfill the promise of a third sequence of the dialectical method?

In what follows, I will not concern myself primarily with assessing the degree to which Badiou's appropriation of the dialectical method does justice to the history of dialectics, or even ask if the very conception of philosophy *as* dialectics can be rendered dubious by challenging the reading of its history as split across two grand epochal moments with Plato and Hegel. Instead, I will attempt to clarify how Badiou's conception of the dialectic informs the internal coherence of his own

philosophical program, and how it specifically conditions the purported coordination of both *rationalism* and *materialism* through the recourses of the *matheme*.<sup>2</sup>

I first explain how the materialist dialectic is conditioned on the reactivation of the two central Platonic dialectical dyads: that of *Truth* and *opinion*, on the one hand, and that of the *intelligible* and the *sensible*, on the other. Like Plato himself, and Hegel after him, Badiou's rationalist articulation of the dialectic across these two axes first proposes to ontologize the realm of formal intelligibility, as it performs a trivialization or demotion of the sensible. Against the primacy and transparency of experience avowed in Aristotle's 'intuitive induction' (*epagoge*), modern empiricisms, as well as all forms of vitalism and phenomenology, Badiou avows the Platonic separation of being from appearance, and identifies mathematics as the medium that accesses being *intrinsically* rather than *representationally* or *hermeneutically*, flattening the distinction between the ideality of forms and the externality of matter (Badiou 2004: 50).

Nevertheless, in reifying the intelligible ontologically so as to prosecute the neo-sophistic adversaries, I argue that Badiou makes a significant concession to idealism, rendering his commitment to materialism problematic. In particular, I assess Badiou's Platonist reading of the Parmenidean thesis which postulates the identity of thinking and being, only this time to be cashed out in terms of their *formal distinction*, rather than explicit identity. Badiou's materialism sets out to think a *real difference* without an *ontological difference*, by rendering ontological thought indifferent to actual and qualitative determinations. Yet the liquidation of any operative notion of externality that results from the trivialization of sensibility and experience through the opacity of the *matheme* leaves Badiou's rationalism incapable of discriminating between real and merely discursive qualitative

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<sup>2</sup> For a philosophical discussion of Badiou's early entanglement within the rationalist tradition, and in particular its relation to the scientific method, see Brassier 2010.

distinctions, obviating rather than effacing the categorical oppositions that philosophy is said to cut through diagonally. This ultimately renders the mathematical idealities that presumably think being intrinsically as pure multiplicity fatally divorced from the world, or from the non-ontological situations it sets out to understand through set-theoretical discourse.

**(a) The First Platonic Dyad - Truth and Doxa; Philosophy and Sophistry.**

For Badiou, the declaration for the possibility of philosophy begins by asserting the power of negativity, which entails a reactivation of the Platonic dialectical separation between Truth and opinion, and correspondingly between philosophy and sophistry (Badiou 2008: 11). The “new sophists”, against whom Badiou sets himself, propose a relativization of Truth to the contingent historicity of cultures, thereby deflating the universality of the former in favor of the transient plurality of opinions circulating in the latter. As a result, the reactivation of Truth must wage against all forms of historicist hermeneutics, fixing an eye on the rational access to the universal:

“Language games, deconstruction, weak thought, radical heterogeneity, *differend* and differences, the ruin of Reason, promotion of the fragment, discourse reduced to shreds: all this argues in favor of a sophistic line of thinking, and puts philosophy in a deadlock” (Badiou 2008: 20)

The sophist’s key maneuver consists in attempting to bring to a halt philosophical discursivity in advance, foreclosing sensitivity to the force of reasons by *negating negation itself*. That is, the sophist begins by denying the philosophical use of dialectical rationality in its power of *exclusion* in refusing the primitive separation between Truth and *doxa*, what is and what is not, reality and appearance.

The result is that whereas the sophist preemptively folds Truth into opinion, the philosopher insists on thinking their possible separation without having to appeal to the mystical by evacuating discourse. The sophist annuls the separation between being and non-being, reality and appearance by denying the very force of the scission attempted in the name of *reason*. And indeed, the purported inaccessibility of being *qua* being to reason marks the complicity between the contemporary sophist and the mystic, either in annulling the gap between being and appearing (as in post-dialectical thought or vitalist metaphysics), or in reifying the Real as an ineffable Otherness evacuated from the positivity of rational thought (negative dialectics, the Heideggerean Being of Beings as the Earth, the non-ontological deliverance of the Other to the ethical act, that which can only be ‘shown’ and not said)

Against both the irrationalist hijacking of the negative which pushes the Real too far from thought, and the affirmationist annihilation of the negative which annuls the separation between Truth and Opinion in the name of life’s affirmative potency, the rationalist dialectician insists on thought’s capacity to access being and on the difficult, but possible, participation in Truths. The implication is that philosophy’s dialectical task is at once *analytic* and *synoptic*: it brings together the autonomous procedures than condition it at a given time by way of the concept of Truth, but to do so must render explicit the protocols of discernment between the space of mere opinions and the exceptional form of Truth. To stave off the sophist, the dialectical philosopher must distinguish reality from appearance, being *qua* being from mere semblances, and finally the exceptional character of Truth from being itself. It must recognize order if only to admit of the possibility of its disruption.

But how are ‘appearances’ to be understood as being in complicity with sophist and the ‘democratic materialist’ cult of opinions? The Platonic answer reveals in imitation or *mimesis* the proximity between the production of both the sophist and the artist. Plato in fact explicitly connects the deceptive lure of the sophist in his use of rhetoric to the lure of the semblances produced by the artist:

“We know, of course, that he who professes by one art to make all things is really a painter, and by the painter’s art makes resemblances of real things which have the same name with them; and he can deceive the less intelligent sort of young children, to whom he shows his pictures at a distance, into the belief that he has the absolute power of making whatever he likes [...] And may there not be supposed to be an imitative art of reasoning? Is it not possible to enchant the hearts of young men by words poured through their ears, when they are still at a distance from the truth of facts, by exhibiting to them fictitious arguments, and making them think that they are true, and that the speaker is the wisest of men in all things?” (Plato 1952: 156)

The key to unraveling the connection between the sophist’s avowal of *doxa* and the artist’s imitative craft consists precisely in the common desire to counterfeit reality by way of appearances. But just like appearances can only imperfectly resemble the Real, the rhetorical imitative craft of the sophist only gives an impression of Truth. In each case, an irresolvable gap is camouflaged by a talent for deception: the sophists veil their rational weakness by giving a semblance of knowledge through the perspicuous use of rhetoric, while the artist’s work hides its difference from nature in copying it, and even more so from the forms of which the natural world are already a semblance. The artist is therefore separated from the Real *twice*, since in mimicking nature he/she seeks to imitate an

imitation, nature being already the mere sensible appearance of the intelligible reality of forms. In the same context, the prisoners of the cave described in the *Republic*, separated from the light of the Real, dwell in appearances insofar as they remain submitted to the givenness of the sensible; for them “[...] the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images” (Plato 1952: 156). We thus obtain the second crucial dialectical dyad in Plato’s dialectical beginning: that between the *intelligible (eidos)* and the *sensible (soma)*. This dyad clarifies the way in which Truth and opinion, reality and appearances, can be adjudicated by way of the rationalist dialectic.

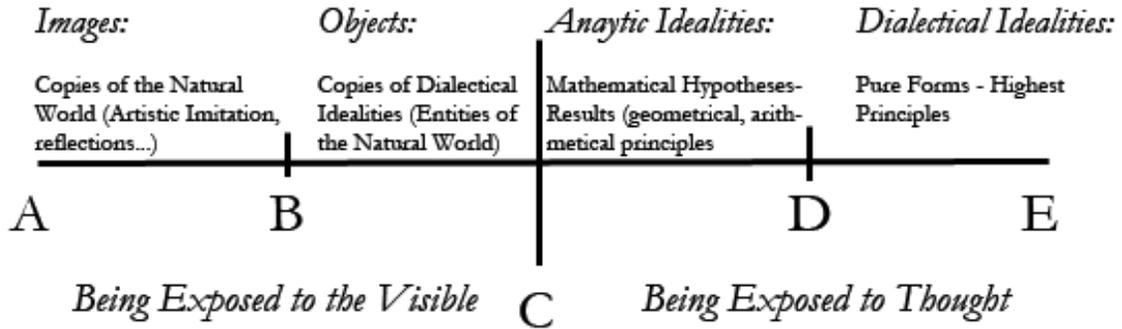
**(b) The Second Platonic Dyad - the Intelligible and the Sensible; Reality and Appearance.**

It is no surprise that Badiou finds complicity between the contemporary philosophical suture to poetry and art, and the sophistic coup against the rationalist dialectic. It is poetry, in its tacit rejection of the universality of Truth and of the discursive demand imposed by dialectical rationality, that forces itself in authoritarian fashion; opinion, not Truth, is on the side of dogma:

“Now, poetry, as generous as its beauty may be, is indubitably an authoritarian form of declaration. It draws authority only from itself, abhors argument, and states *what is*, in the sensory form of what imposes itself without having to share this imposition” (Badiou 2006b: 40).

Badiou sides with Plato in mapping the separation between reality and appearance onto the distinction between the world of the visible and the world of the intelligible, setting the thought of the latter through mathematics against the primacy endowed to the former by the poets.

**DIAGRAM I:**  
**The Sensible and the Intelligible, Appearances and Being**



Badiou describes the passage from the visible to the intelligible as the movement from the world of sensible appearances to the intelligible reality of forms, via a progressive ‘purification’. The line AD above represents the ‘second order’ imitations that pertain to the mimetic creation of the artists. These copy the natural objects that populate the perceptible world, designated through section DC. Nevertheless, these natural objects are already themselves derivative copies of the pure forms, the latter being only apprehended by thought at a higher level of abstraction, i.e. at the level of dialectical idealities. It is within the world of the visible that Badiou understands Platonism to find the space for the sophistic commerce of opinions, the irrationalist denial of the negative, and for the consequent submission of thought to the present of sensible appearances.

Consequently, it is the removal from the sensible that maps the dialectical transition from *doxa* to Truth. The threshold of the intelligible is crossed when we first apprehend *analytic idealities*, which pertain to those objects, exemplified by geometrical thinking, which are derived and rationally cognized on the basis of presupposed principles. Analytic thought, designated through section CE, is therefore somewhere between pure opinions/images (AD), and pure Truths /dialectical idealities

(EB). The final section, EB, thereby designates those ideal postulates which are not merely ‘presupposed’ or derived from hypothetical givens. They are dialectical insofar as they are *underived*: first principles which are rationally ascended to, rather than hypothetically assumed as experientially given. It is in the height of rational ascent, expressed only ideally and to thought, that thinking accesses the reality above the appearances. The image of the *sun*, awaiting the prisoner who flees the cave and the world of shadows behind is, therefore, not to be understood in terms of the phenomenological light of the “clearing of being”, which opens the sensible world of experience to thinking. Rather, it embodies the rational acknowledgement of the ontological *opacity* of the visible world, and the deceptiveness of the sensible. Philosophy, delivered as it is to the thought of the Real, must therefore wrest itself from the givenness of the sensible in the name of Truth: “Philosophy is not an interpretation of the sense of what is offered to experience; it consists in the operation of a category subtracted from the category of presence” (Badiou 2008: 25). If mathematics is the vehicle for thought to subtract itself from presence, under the title of the materialist dialectic, it is because, Badiou tells us, “[w]e call Platonist the recognition of mathematics as a form of thinking that is intransitive to perceptual and linguistic experience, and which depends on a decision that makes room for the undecidable and assumes that everything which is consistent exists” (Badiou 2004: 50).

Badiou’s rationalism is therefore both Platonic and Cartesian in that it assigns an ontological status to the logical development expressed by formal thought and the pure idealities it posits:

“Inversely [to poetry], mathematics disciplines thought through explicit rules, not through the singular genius of language, and offers to everyone a shared demonstration, whilst never giving up on ultimate clarity – as complicated as its

construction may be. It informs the True without conceding anything to the trembling or existential doubt before that whose cruel necessity it unveils. So, it is necessary to affirm that, contrary to what is generally said, it is mathematics which is democratic and poetry which is aristocratic, or royal” (Badiou 2006b: 40).

As it turns out, the Platonist distinction between Truth and opinion requires from us to evacuate the sensible to the point where thought itself, through mathematical inscription, becomes *indiscernible* from being as such. Plato’s fundamental concern is to “declare the immanent identity, the co-belonging of the knowing mind and the known, their essential ontological commensurability [...] In so far as it touches on being, mathematics thinks being intrinsically” (Badiou 2004: 50). This is the germ that sets the Platonist understanding of dialectics already against the revisionary (naturalist) Aristotelian claim, according to which experience and intuition are primary in the order of knowing. The latter cannot but vitiate the integrated rationalist perspective that Badiou deems necessary to stave off the new sophists, to disarm the ideological ubiquity of democratic materialism, and set thought in the vector of a true materialism. Mathematics is the site where the split between form and content becomes first trivialized, and Badiou’s wager is that this operation can be carried out without launching a Pythagorean idealism.

The ‘Idea’ in Plato is therefore the point at which thinking and being become non-mimetically available to discourse by direct apprehension, “rendering immanence and transcendence indiscernible, in taking up a position in a site of thinking where this distinction is inoperative” (Badiou 2004: 50). Yet this carries the implication that the world of the sensible, that is, the qualitative differences we can conceptually grasp in *non-ontological* situations, would be definitively fenced off from the *ontological* transparency of the rationalist integration of thought and being.

Mathematics, as the thought of being *qua* being, would not be set to think of intra-worldly distinctions. Yet it remains rather unclear to what extent the *indistinction* between thought and being, through mathematics, can help us think the being *of beings* as multiplicity, or can indeed be apposite to a materialism; to what extent can the multiple forms discerned by mathematics said to be *of* the qualitative differences that make up ordinary situations. Indeed, it remains unclear on what grounds *ontology* can assume its status as first philosophy through the *decision* that being is multiple, and Zermelo-Fraenkel axiomatized set-theory its expression.

It is clear that Badiou agrees with Plato in that, to counter the sophist's surrender to sensibility, the philosopher must ontologize the forms of pure intelligibility, at the price of purging the sensible. It is only insofar as it achieves this purification that mathematics is said to think being 'intrinsically'. Yet how is this *intrinsic* access that formalization achieves *vis a vis* the world to be conceived, if not by a relation of *identity* between the forms and the real, one which would however render the world inherently 'mathematized', and thus preemptively *idealize* it? What epistemic criteria tell us how mathematical forms are 'connected' with reality, if not through the mediation of a representation that would render them complicit with appearances? Yet if the mathematical forms are neither realities in themselves (Pythagorean idealism) nor mere appearances (subjective-transcendental idealism), in what sense can they assume an 'ontological status'?<sup>3</sup> How to think of mathematical forms as embodying the discourse of being *qua* being along with Badiou's startling claim that the thesis that mathematics is ontology is not "a claim about the world, but about discourse" (Badiou 2006a: 14).

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<sup>3</sup> It is clear that Badiou seeks to deny a two-world metaphysical reading of Platonism, for as he claims, the thesis that being is ontological "does not in any way declare that being is mathematical, which is to say composed of mathematical objectivities" (Badiou 2006a: 8).

Without a clear answer as to their articulation between, the externality of the worldly appearances with respect to the forms apprehended through mathematics threatens to vitiate the purported *immanence* of the dialectic, and the rationalist integrity of philosophical discourse. Indeed, Badiou would have evacuated the rationalist demand for dialectic at the moment of an explanatory deficiency. For the sensible is said to ‘participate’ *in* the forms, remaining really distinct, if not ontologically *discernible*, from them. Mathematical thought does not claim to *represent* the Real, but to think the very *constitution* of being qua being, as pure dialectical idealities. By the same token, sensibility is trivialized ubiquitously as ontologically vacuous, complicit with transience of a present before which reason’s arrest is rendered inoperative. If so, then on what terms could their ‘connection’ be elucidated, as it must be, to meet the rationalist demands?<sup>4</sup>

On the face of it, and since it is the set that gives the form of multiple presentation in general, denying the reality of mathematical forms or their identity with beings in the world would surely incite the kinds of Aristotelian questions about the connection between the world and its form, reality and its representation or inscription, that he seems to want to avoid. It would become incumbent to *explain* and not just posit how to coordinate between the multiplicity of presentations (world), and the presentation *of* presentation through the set (ontology). Or, as Zachary Luke Fraser points out, Badiou would face a problem when coordinating the merely discursive status of sets in the unique situation that is ontological discourse, with the field of (non-ontological) worldly presentations. For it is the latter that, after all, the set presumably expresses in presenting the *form* of presentation proper, without falling prey to epistemological gulfs, thereby escaping the mimetic fate

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle testifies to this split in the way of contesting the two-world theory: “While Socrates was preoccupied with Ethics and not at all with nature as a whole, yet in the former he sought for the universal and was the first to reflect upon definitions. Plato, who had accepted the theories of Cratylus, was thus led to believe that the Socratic search was concerned with other than sensible things. For it was impossible for a universal definition to be that of a particular sensible, since sensibles are forever changing. It thus came about that he called this kind of reality Forms (*eide*) and maintained that sensibles exist side by side with them and are named after them” (Metaphysics A, 987 a 30).

of all transcendental and representational discourse: “It seemed to me that there could be no hope of set-theoretic ontology providing the groundwork of a theory of situations and subjective actions without at least the possibility of a bridge between the two being elucidated” (Fraser 2007: 62-64).

Although this question would apparently obtain an answer in *Logics of Worlds*, where Badiou describes the ontic consistency of worlds and their connection to sets qua pure multiplicities, this just shifts the emphasis from the connection between 1) the nominal status of entities in *ontological* discourse qua set-theory and presentations, to 2) the connection between the nominal entities of *mathematical* discourse, in both its ontological and phenomenological roles, and the reality of non-mathematical presentations-worlds as such. The question therefore pertains to an apparent tension between Badiou’s simultaneous commitment to Platonism and to materialism. How to defend the transcendence of mathematical form with respect to sensible-phenomenological givenness, without compromising ontological univocity? Additionally, it becomes incumbent to explain the articulation between the formal dimension of the sensible in its intelligibility, and its autonomous reality: it would require for us to explain how thought *re-presents* the primitive presentation of being which does not depend on or is constituted by thought’s positing of dialectical idealities. Hasn’t the indiscernibility of thought and being, however, foreclosed the possibility of such an explanation? And in doing so, don’t we risk again a ‘cunning’ idealism, if not sophistry, where the separation of the sensible becomes perhaps only *showable*, but not sayable, not proper to the dialectic at all?

Yet it is clear that locating the forms immanently, within the sensible itself, would contest the disruption that Truth, above and beyond being, is supposed to hold as a creative possibility pertaining to thought. For Truth, in Badiou’s account, is supposed to be precisely subtracted from the specificity of the sensible, and never disclosed or given to experience. It is, again “subtracted

from the category of presence” (Badiou 2008: 23). How to clarify the difference between thought and its object without rendering this difference transcendent metaphysically? At this juncture, we must consider the second great sequence in the dialectics in the work of Hegel.

**(c) The Hegelian Axis: Logic as Metaphysics, or the Absolutizing of Subjectivity.**

For Hegel, the unfolding of a new dialectics is required to overcome the empiricist reliance on representation, since empiricism risks divorcing thought from its object by rendering the latter external to the former (Hegel 1991: 28-31). Until the Kantian critical sequence, philosophy is seen to relegate thought to the condition of its own finitude, by evacuating being-in-itself from our slumber amidst appearances. Against the ineffability of the in-itself, which as we saw becomes complicit with the subsequent sophistic-mystical avowal of the irrationality of being, Hegel insists in thought’s power before the Real, that is, in a rationalist overcoming of epistemological representation. While in objective representation being remains contingently posited, it falls to philosophy to produce the appropriate *concepts* to establish their actual logical necessity:

“In the order of time, consciousness produces representational *notions* of ob-jects before it produces *concepts* of them; and that the *thinking spirit* only advances to thinking cognition and comprehension by going *through* representation and by converting oneself to it [...] that thoughtful consideration implies the requirement that the *necessity* of its content should be shown, and the very being, as well as the determinations of its ob-jects should be proved” (Hegel 1991: 21).

Whereas empiricism and critical philosophy subordinated thought the objects of experience, falling short of establishing the actual necessity of its objects, the dialectic, as we saw above, admits of no hypothetical postulates, and jettisons the transience of sensible immediacy. Even for Kant, Hegel remarks, the objects of thought must be postulated as necessarily configured on the basis of assumed rather than derived principles, while it must relegate the status of such objects to phenomenal appearances, at a loss for traction before the in-itself. Such is the status of the facticity of thought: critique must remain *analytic*, in Plato's sense, but fall short of being *dialectical* proper. In this sense, the modern adversary to the rationalist dialectic proves to require, much like the battle against the sophist and the poets did for Plato, a trivialization of experiential content and of sensible immediacy. Only after ascending from the contingency of given objects to the logical necessity of the dialectical Concept, does thought gain purchase before the reality of what is rational (Hegel 1991: 28-30):

“[T]he genuine *content* of our consciousness is *preserved* when it is translated into the form of thought and the concept [...] the content of philosophy is *actuality*. The first consciousness of this content is called *experience*. Within the broad realm of outer and inner thereness a judicious consideration of the world already distinguishes that which only *appearance*, transient and insignificant, from that which truly and in itself merits the name of *actuality* [...] The notion that ideas and ideals are nothing but chimeras and that philosophy is a system of pure phantasms, sets itself at once against the *actuality of what is rational* [...] However, the severing of actuality from the Idea is particularly dear to the understanding, which regards its dreams (i.e. its abstractions) as something genuine” (Hegel 1991: 30).

Hegel thus agrees with Plato in that philosophy's task is to secure a necessary continuity between rational thought and the Real, which renders a direct complicity between logic and metaphysics, or the discursive presentation on being (ontology) and the world itself. Yet Hegel's attempt to avoid representation, and the transcendental gulf between thought and being, comes by rendering the difference between thought and its object immanent to thinking. This is done by inscribing logical implication into nature itself, along with the force of the negation, thereby folding natural causation into the intentionality of logical discursivity. The ontological development of the Real is rationally deducible from the dialectical movement of the Concept by way of the negative. In doing so, Hegel proposes a reification of the correlation between thinking and being through the identification of logic and metaphysics, as the ontologization of thought itself. However, rather than untethering the forms of thought from the constitution of the sensible, Hegel's absolutization of the correlation between thinking and being locates sense-givenness as merely the first *moment* which phenomenologically shows itself to already presuppose mediation by the Concept. In other words, it depletes the concept of the "pure sensible" of any ontologico-epistemic valence, by locating it as the height of abstraction, lacking any conceptual determination, and so without any ontological positivity. The saturation of the intellect disregards the barrenness of experience as the 'emptiest' moment of the dialectic.

But this means that whatever appears as immediately given to experience must in truth be always already, implicitly, affected by mediation, that is, by its exact opposite: "We must reject the opposition between an independent immediacy in the contents or facts of consciousness and an equally independent mediation, supposed incompatible with the former. The incompatibility is a mere assumption, an arbitrary assertion" (Hegel 1991: 56). Again, we read: "There is nothing, nothing in heaven, in nature, in spirit, or anywhere else which does not contain both immediacy and

mediation” (Hegel 1991: 78). Contradiction derives from the dialectical splitting of thought and its object, rather than in a transcendental gulf forever barred from thought’s access. This operation is not one of representation or imitation, and does not proceed by abstraction. It is thoroughly rationalist insofar as it sets itself to *derive* the causal occasion from the primitive conceptual forms of logical implication; metaphysical strictures from logical ones.

Rather than claiming that the sensible *participates* in the dialectical idealities, Hegel makes sensibility internal to the mediation of the Concept by the force of the negative. For Plato, it seemed that the dialectical separation between reality and appearance required a two-world metaphysical divide between the sensible and the intelligible. By absolutizing the correlation between the subject and its object, Hegel makes appearances themselves affected by the negativity of the conceptual. The mutual implication between the intelligible and the sensible evinces the general operation of the dialectic’s logical movement, in which the identity of Being is affected by its opposite determination, reverting into it before establishing the unity of its moments. Negativity in the concept rationalizes the gap between the sensible and the intelligible as immanent to the intelligible itself. And just like the immediacy of pure Being reverts into Nothing, only to see this movement sublated as the unity of Becoming, logico-metaphysical knowledge supersedes the apparent immediacy of all sensible content to unearth its tacit reality or truth in conceptual mediation: “In this way, our knowledge of God, like our knowledge of all that is supersensible in general, essentially involves an *elevation* (*Aufgehoben*) above sensible feeling or intuition; hence it involves a *negative* attitude toward the latter as first and in that sense it involves *mediation*” (Hegel 1991: 82).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In this regard, the Hegelian logical usage of negation clearly resists the classical Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction and the excluded middle, and consequentially the principle of double negation. The negation of the negation is not equivalent to immediate affirmation, but determines Being’s reflexive existence, that is, its sublation at the next level of determination.

We should read the implicitly anti-Kantian gesture indicated here by the appeals to intuition and sensibility. The point Hegel seeks to underline is that the factual ‘givenness’ of the representational form of experience, tethered to sensuous receptivity, is irremediably external to thinking if merely posited as a given datum ‘without reason’. Thus, the facultative split in the Kantian edifice, which separates the understanding from intuition as the two ‘species’ of representation cannot but reproduce the internal-external dichotomy. The externality of the universal (categories) with regard to their particularizing sensible content then become contingently stapled one onto the other as a series of *schematic* instantiations of the objects of experience. As long as it remains incapable of deducing the categories which give way to the objects of experience, philosophy falls short of its name by failing to secure the necessity between the empirical and the transcendental: the universal genera which provide the determinations, and the manifold particular contents which actualize them. That is, if the determination of the empirical can only be legitimated *a priori* by an arbitrarily posited categorical framework that explains objective individuation, then critique has merely transposed the arbitrariness of dogmatic metaphysics into the agency of the transcendental subject. Indeed, this seems to be Hegel’s own contention when claiming that for Kant experience is endowed with necessity, but that it is factually given as the necessity/universality of appearances within the ‘spontaneity of thinking’. Hegel writes:

“Critical philosophy *holds on to the factum* that *universality* and *necessity*, being also essential determinations, are found to be present in what is called experience. And, because this element does not stem from the empirical as such, it belongs to the spontaneity of *thinking*, or is *a priori*. The thought-determinations of *concepts of the understanding* make up *the objectivity* of the cognitions of experience” (Hegel 1991: 81).

Thought determines objective Being as implied in the Concept's progressive self-determination, or as thinking to itself. The seemingly paradoxical result is that, to render immanent the relation of thought and being to the rationalist dialectic, Hegel ontologizes their difference as taking place within thought, i.e. transcendence is thought immanently by the ubiquity of thinking. The Concept is not merely thought's abstracting agent; being-in-itself is not transcendent to thought. In doing so, Hegel avoids the problem incumbent in a direct endorsement of a 'two-world' Platonism which, as we saw, threatened the distinction between the ontological reality of mathematical idealities and the world of presentation. We can here appreciate how Hegel's dialectical rejoinders to empiricism and critique anticipate Badiou's own challenge to phenomenology and empiricist epistemology. Hegel, like Plato before him and Badiou after him, endorses the ontological reification of the intelligible, and so the inflection of nature into thought. The proper Hegelian dialectical solution comes then in inflecting the sensible into the intelligible by identifying logic and metaphysics, unearthing the mediation of the subjective Concept in every semblance of experiential givenness.

Meillassoux suggests that the price to be paid for the rationalist immanence of the dialectic is the ubiquity of the correlation between the agent of thought and being as such (Meillassoux 2008). It is clear that if Badiou's own dialectic is to be *materialist*, it surely cannot rely on the blunt idealist thesis according to which being and thinking are identical in the sense in which being is *subjectively* constituted. To deny this would be to hypostasize the ontologization of mathematics into a full-blown Pythagoreanism, which would claim for the reality of mathematical abstractions, constituted by thought alone, contradicting the claim that the thesis that ontology is mathematics is a claim about discourse rather than about the world. Even if Hegel succeeds in avoiding a two-world metaphysics by rendering the distinction between thought and being immanent to thought by way of the identity of logic and metaphysics, Badiou must therefore explain how thought is dialectically

articulated with being, without thereby affirming their real identity. That is, the dialectic must both avoid a two-world metaphysics, thus rendering the distinction between thought and being dialectically *immanent*, but without thereby idealizing being, and so keeping the separation between appearance and reality effective. How can *ontology* think real difference without relapsing of a metaphysical dualism, of the sort that reinstates the primacy of representation and the *externality* of being with respect to thought?

In short, how can the dialectic be rationalist and materialist at once? In order to see how Badiou attempts to mobilize the dialectic to fulfill this promise in a third stage, also carrying out the post-Marxist attempt to dislodge dialectics from idealism, it is instructive to understand why it is mathematics, in his estimation, that promises to be uniquely adequate to the task.

**(d) The *Matheme*'s Subtractive Power: A Philosophical Appropriation of Lacan.**

Like Hegel, Badiou seeks to oppose the radicalization of the post-Kantian correlationist insistence on 'content', proper to both empiricism and phenomenology. As we saw above, both traditions continue to vitiate the rationalist core of the dialectic, insofar as they continue to surrender philosophy to sensibility and experience, at the price of submitting thought to the transience of the present. Against this, like Plato, the rationalist dialectic was shown to require the ontologizing of the intelligible at the price of trivializing or evacuating the sensible from ontology. Yet how is sensibility denoted without inflecting the world *subjectively* by way of the Concept? At this juncture, Badiou proposes to hijack Lacan's anti-philosophical strategy to claim the proximity between the Real and mathematics, and to transpose this thesis into an ontological register.

For Lacan, the pressing task is to find a discursive means for thinking the Real of desire and subjectivity, apart from the commerce of the symbolic, in which philosophy and (ego)-psychology remain encumbered. From *Seminar XI* onwards, Lacan flirts with the idea that mathematization allows precisely for this kind of operation. As Russell had already noted, the *matheme* subtracts itself from the order of the symbolic, because the statements it produces are not inherently meaningful. According to Lacan, “the mathematical formalization of signifierness runs counter to meaning” (Lacan 1999: 93). Thus, we cannot ‘translate’ mathematical formulas or their syntactical composition into ontological, or epistemological terms. For Lacan, this is a crucial requirement for dislodging psychoanalysis from (ego)-psychology, which continues to think the subject as a substantive individual, and which must therefore tacitly remain encumbered in the imaginary-symbolic envelopment of the signifier, and of the symptom. What the *matheme* offers, in turn, is a non-translatable formal ideography recalcitrant to such operations:

“Mathematization alone reaches a real - and it is in that respect that it is compatible with our discourse, with analytic discourse- a real that has nothing to do with what traditional knowledge has served as a basis for, which is not what the latter believes it to be- namely, reality, but rather phantasy [...] The Real, I will say, is the mystery of the speaking body, the mystery of the unconscious” (Lacan 1999: 131).

Thus, the *matheme* remains, for Lacan, ‘closest’ to the Real.

For Badiou, this Lacanian insight can be appropriated to counter the post-Kantian phenomenological reliance on the subject of experience. Mathematics defuses the Hegelian preponderance on the subjective Concept, just as it sides with the latter in trivializing the experiential

givenness primed by empiricism and phenomenology. The *matheme* proves thus adequate in providing the formal resources to think of a rational discourse unencumbered by the subjectivizing of the Real, without thereby transcendently distinguishing between form and content, intelligibility and sensibility. It does this by rendering the opposition between subject and object ineffectual, proposing a formal ideography where difference is immanently constituted.<sup>6</sup> It is in this sense that mathematics is the mark of ‘scientificity’ for Badiou, insofar as it rises to the Hegelian esteem of providing a transparent discourse for the thinking of what there is.<sup>7</sup> Following Bachelard and Althusser, mathematics is understood to conquer the ideological imaginary by disarming ideological *doxa* of discourses (Bachelard 2002: 24). But rather than a global transformative scope in the way of an ‘epistemological rupture’ (*rupture épistémologique*) or even an ‘epistemological break’ (*coupure épistémologique*), by the time *Being and Event* is written, Badiou thinks of mathematical disruption as an *ontological* rupture, insofar as it tethers thought immanently to the thought of the pure multiple, amputating itself from the impositions of empiricism set by what he calls “bourgeois epistemology”.<sup>8</sup> However peculiar and autonomous a situation, no longer the sole site for disrupting the status quo of ‘democratic materialism’ Badiou endows mathematics the ontological prerogative to which the philosophical dialectic must subject itself through the decision, insofar as it is mathematics’ *conceptual* invention that performs the trivializing of commonplace categorical distinctions. Ray Brassier summarizes the propriety of scientific thought, emblemized by mathematicity:

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<sup>6</sup> The extensionality of axiomatic set-theoretical discourse, in particular, differentiates on the basis of an undefined concept of multiplicity on the basis of membership and the unique operation of belonging, without qualitatively distinguishing between its terms.

<sup>7</sup> Badiou’s most rigorous account of the relation between philosophy, science, and ideology occurs at the beginning of his philosophical career in four texts published between 1966 and 1969. These are ‘The (Re)commencement of Dialectical Materialism’ (1966), ‘Mark and Lack: On Zero’ (1967), ‘Infinitesimal Subversion’ (1969), and *The Concept of Model* (1969).

<sup>8</sup> Of course, this ‘ontological rupture’ is supplemented with an account of the event as the ‘rupture of the ontological’, where the subjective decision outstrips the order of Being, and sets thought in a new Truth-procedure

“Scientific thought is ‘outside’, i.e. beyond the enclosure of ideological representation; not because the subject of science is endowed with a faculty of intellectual intuition that would grant her intuitive access to a transcendent realm of intelligible objects, but on the contrary, because the remorselessly mechanical ‘rule governed transparency’ of logico-mathematical inscription results in a cognitive practice for which the categories of subject and object are completely superfluous” (Brassier 2010: 7).

In *The Concept of Model*, Badiou thus pits his materialist epistemology of mathematics against the operations of “bourgeois epistemologists”, which continue to reduce the *matheme* to a mere abstract form, and thus mathematics and mathematized logic to the status of merely *formal* sciences. Just as for Hegel the depreciation of the formal as a “mere abstraction” belied the actuality of the rational, captured by the dialectic, Badiou seeks to demonstrate that the *matheme* is conceptually untranslatable into such oppositions, controlling itself internally. As Brassier notes, for Badiou, naturalized epistemology therefore continues to rely on the mutual implication between fact and form, as it continues to tether thought to experience: “Thus in a surprising empiricist mimesis of the serpent of absolute knowledge swallowing its own tail, naturalized epistemology seeks to construct a virtuous circle wherein the congruence between fact and form is explained through the loop whereby representation is grounded in fact and fact is accounted for by representation” (Brassier 2010: 9) Or, in Badiou’s own words: “If science is an imitative artifice, the artificial imitation of this artifice is, in effect, Absolute Knowledge” (Badiou 2007: 21).

Yet if the epistemology that seeks to theorize mathematics as merely formal or representational is an *imitative* enterprise, then it becomes complicit with sophistry as we outlined in the first section. Absolute Knowledge would, paradoxically, coincide with the ‘second order’ imitations of the artists

who rely on deception. Such an ideological coating of mathematics, which makes of its production *secondary* and imitative, is to be placed against the primary production of the *matheme*. Mathematics does not think the materiality of being by relating words and things, concepts and objects. Formalization rather subtracts the syntax or symbols it deploys from its conceptual envelopment, prizing them free from any semblance of ‘meaning’ or intentional content. Badiou proposes thus to defuse the distinction between formal thought and empirical content, inherent in all naturalized epistemology, as a ‘third dogma of empiricism’ undetected by Quine. Both the *technical regulation* and the *cognitive production* of mathematics are internal to their own operations, and non-translatable to any pragmatic register. Put differently, science gains traction on reality not through the mediating role of the knowing subject, or by reaching outwards onto the contentful world of experience, but rather by differentiating its intrinsic notional material, stratifying itself, and subtracting its operations from any ideological notions or even philosophical categories.<sup>9</sup>

Supplanting the connection between mathematical form and empirical content, Badiou articulates mathematical production as the dialectical interplay between logic and algebraic mathematics. Rather than mathematics *modeling* the non-mathematical world by imitative acumen, what we get is the articulation between three mathematical components: 1) *a formal system* - axiomatically articulating the syntax of the theory, as well as the rules of formation and deduction for the production of statements within it; b) *a structure* - which provides a domain of interpretation, thoroughly mathematized as a non-empty set; c) *rules of correspondence* - which provides a semantics for the coordination between the two. Rather than form abstracting itself from content to understand theories as models for the world, Badiou elucidates the coordination between two mathematically

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<sup>9</sup> The distinction and dialectical interplay between ideological notions, philosophical categories, and scientific concepts becomes crucial for Badiou's understanding of mathematical productivity.

perspicuous constituents: the *domain of interpretation* now functions instead as a *model* for the formal system.<sup>10</sup> Correspondently, Badiou writes:

“It is precisely because it is itself a materialized theory, a mathematical result, that the formal apparatus is capable of entering into the process of the production of mathematical knowledge; a process in which the concept of model does not indicate an exterior to be formalized but a mathematical material to be tested [...] Mathematical demonstration is tested through the rule-governed transparency of inscriptions. In mathematics, inscription represents the moment of verification” (Badiou 2007: 144).

This is the *subtractive* nature of logico-mathematical inscription: it provides a stratified multiplicity of non-qualitative differences, so that “no signifying order can envelop the strata of its discourse” (Badiou 1967: 163). Mathematics holds the key to a materialist ontology insofar as it sheds off all forms of ideological envelopment through which idealist philosophy and ‘bourgeois epistemology’ end up subjectivizing being and appearances, and mystifying being as an externality through ideal transcendence.<sup>11</sup>

This insight into the dialectical interplay *within* mathematics proves of outmost relevance to see how Badiou attempts to overcome the problem, indicated in the first section, about the coordination between the discourse of ontology and the world. For as Lyotard and Deleuze, among others, had perceptively noted, in *Being and Event* the connection between the mathematical and the non-mathematical was posited merely analogically, with set-theory regulating itself in relation to ordinary

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<sup>10</sup> If all deducible expressions in the system correspond to a true statement on the domain of interpretation the latter is a model for the system.

<sup>11</sup> For an outline of Badiou’s relation to and departure from Althusser’s own reading on ideology see in particular Badiou’s review of Althusser’s *Pout Marx, Livre Capital*, in “Le (re)commencement du materialisme dialectique”.

presentations through philosophically allusive metaphors. Once set-theory has been explicitly identified with ontology, only philosophy connects the formal presentation of the structure of being as ontology with the multiplicity of situations, which make up the world, by way of *analogy*. That is, one of the four ‘pincers’ that Deleuze had identified as pertaining to *representation* (Deleuze 1994). As we noted, however, in *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou re-elaborates the distinction between ontology and ordinary presentations in terms of the articulation between a) the *axiomatics* of Zermelo-Fraenkel set-theory, and b) the *categorical theoretical* Greater Logic which proposes the form of worlds. The *analogical* connection between the mathematical and non-mathematical is thereby displaced in favor of a perspicuously mathematized theory where non-ontological situations, or worlds, would serve as potential models for set theory.

Consequentially, Badiou’s dialectics seek to purge the idealist subjectivism from rationalist discourse by in turn subscribing to the Cartesian avowal of the reality of primary properties, that is, those mathematically measurable properties. But it does so by avoiding the idealist affirmation of *ontological identity* between thinking and being which results in the absolutization of the ideal correlation between the subject and its object. In rendering the distinction between the internal the external ineffectual via the ontologization of mathematics, Badiou provides the means for reading the Platonic distinction between the intelligible and the sensible as merely *formal* rather than fully *ontological*, i.e. a *formal difference* is one that is real, without being ontologically specifiable. In the case at hand, being and thinking would be formal distinctions of being qua multiplicity, since although both are *qualitatively* discernible, they nevertheless are *ontologically* indistinct in their being, i.e. they are indiscernible extensionally considered as multiples subtracted from essence.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Plato himself

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<sup>12</sup> The notion of a formal distinction was first made during the Scholastic period in order to make sense of the idea of a singular substance enjoying a multiplicity of attributes, which were real yet did not quantitatively diversify it. After the works of Duns Scotus and Aquinas, it took shape in the modern philosophy of Descartes and Spinoza when trying to

seems to hint at this reading of the role of dialectical idealities when claiming that: “[T]hat mathematics thinks means in particular that it regards the distinction between a knowing subject and a known object as devoid of pertinence” (Badiou 2004: 54) The intelligibility of forms is not *external* to the being of the sensible, but rather “a coordinated movement of thought, coextensive with being” (Badiou 2004: 54). As Fraser notes: “If this is how we are to understand things, what this means is that the relation between ontology and the various concrete situations that it ‘thinks’ is to be conceived as the relation between a syntactical apparatus and the models that satisfy it” (Fraser 2007: 64-65) The immanence of mathematical productivity is set thus for a coordination of ontological and the logical, system and model, without reinstating the transcendental duality of form and content proper to ‘bourgeois epistemology’, nor the Hegelian ontologization of the subject-object correlation. It thereby attempts to avoid the Platonic problem about the connection between the intelligible and the sensible in the same stroke as it defeats the phenomenological surrender to experiential presence, liquidating sensible content.

### **(e) Conclusion - Towards a Rationalist Materialism**

In spite of the significant advances in Badiou’s attempt at bringing the prospect of a third moment of the rationalist dialectics into fruition, the question about the putative status of the dialectic’s materialism remains. For it is unclear how we are to reconcile the articulation between both poles of the mathematical, the phenomenological and ontological, as articulated above, with the claim that

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resolve the connections between substance, modes and attributes. It would later be rescued in Heidegger’s attempt to think through the connection between essence and existence, and in Deleuze’s hybridization of Spinoza and Bergson. For a perspicuous account see Deleuze’s startling reading of Spinoza’s ‘expressivism’. It is clear, however, that since in Badiou’s ontology being is multiple rather than singular or substantial, the formal distinction would not yield the qualitative diversification of a singular substance, but rather the non-qualitative diversification of multiplicity *as* multiplicity: everything is, in its being a pure multiple, but not every multiple is the same as every other. Yet although these differences are real, and specifiable qualitatively, they are not ontologically specifiable, since ontological distinctions are indifferent to qualities or essence.

the thesis that mathematics is ontology is one about discourse and not about the world. Indeed, it appears that Badiou has merely transferred the question from the connection between set-theory and the world to the connection between the mathematical duplicity of set-theory and category theory, and the world. If Badiou's mathematical Platonism is not a metaphysical reification of mathematical objectivities, or an idealism claiming for the identity of being and thought, then the connection between the non-mathematical and the mathematical is still pending.

As a result, Badiou's modified endorsement of the Parmenidean thesis that being and thinking are the same is unclear. Badiou sought to render trivial the distinction between discourse and the world through the mathematical flattening of the relation between subjective form and empirical content. The favorable result was that the ontological status of mathematics would be explained in terms of the *formal* distinction between the world and the intelligible rather than on their *ontological* identity. Rather than affirming, like Hegel, the identity between thinking and being, via the equation of logic and metaphysics, Badiou shows that for mathematical ontology the two terms remain merely *indistinct*, rendering both ontologically indifferent *qua* multiples. The *real* distinction between thinking and being is thereby not specifiable in ontological discourse, since being *qua* being knows of no qualitative reality, its principle of individuation being purely extensional rather than intensionally determined.

Yet from the ontological *indiscernibility* between thought and world, which remains *epistemic*, it is clear that one cannot conclude their *real* distinction. The ontological indistinction between thinking and being does not explain *how* we are to explain their formal distinction; indeed univocity within the extensionalist paradigm of set-theory can only come at the price of having nothing to say about the criterion for the diversification of the real. Insensitive to modal distinctions between the actual and

the possible, and subjected to purely extensional regime of individuation, the question about *which multiplicities are real* becomes delegated to natural language and its qualitative distinctions, where any sayable difference can turn out to be real or not without vitiating ontological flatness. That is to say, ontological indiscernibility does not itself motivate real difference, and cannot be taken to be an index for the formal distinction short of yielding a promiscuous reality for which every qualitative distinction is a real difference. Once qualitative distinctions are said to have no ontological status proper, they become the sole arbiters on whose basis we can adjudicate real differences.

By the same token, phenomenology sets out to think the consistency of worlds without thereby becoming identical to the worlds themselves, expressing their general *form* irrespective of the *formal* distinction between a ‘real object’ and the nominal form of the object in general. For just as it is not clear on what basis we could settle *which pure multiplicities* are real or actual, phenomenology’s evaluation of intensities tells us nothing about how to determine whether an *object* is real or actual; indeed, the evaluation of intensities required to recognize the appearing of a multiple in a world tells us only *that* an object in a world appears according to an order-structure, not *how* such an order structure allows an evaluation of multiplicities as being in the world or not. For, if all it takes for something to be recognized as a multiple or object in the world is our capacity to qualitatively distinguish it from something else, then every possible qualitative difference turns out to yield a real difference. Thought, Cats, the Bald King of France, and Triangularity are all disarmingly equal ontologically or phenomenologically: pure multiplicities that might appear in a world or not. This problem is pressing, for Badiou gives us no means to assess the ‘degree of appearing’ of a multiple without having to surrender the dialectic to the courts of phenomenological *intuition*. It would seem as if the rationalist dialectic, in order to save itself from an *idealist* conflation of thought and the world, finally gives in to the phenomenological or empiricist pathos of experience.

But this raises the question: if neither set-theoretical mathematics, nor categorical-theoretical phenomenology, speak about the intra-worldly entities in their qualitative and modal determinations, then on what basis do we determinate that they are nevertheless adequate to think the *being* of precisely this world(s). On what basis, that is, can set-theoretical mathematics specifically be considered a theory *of* presentation, and the axiomatization proposed by ZF more so? Prosecuting such a strong divorce between the empirical and the rational, having eviscerated experience from ontology, Badiou's rationalist dialectics fails to explain on what grounds mathematics thinks the world without the questionable appeals to an ur-decision, just as like the event surreptitiously violates the inertia of the axiomatic by appeals to the 'subjective decision'. Nothing tells us how the extensionalist regime of discernibility in the operations of mathematics over its syntactic, notional material, indicate that it is *these* syntactical units through *these* axioms in particular that serve as the mark of adequacy or discursive purchase before the being of the Real? This problem takes us right back to the beginning of Badiou's dispute against representationalist epistemology, and his attempts to motivate a rationalist materialism. For as Robert Brandom (1995) diagnoses, such methodological impasses are nothing but the natural result of short-circuiting the problematic about representational accuracy or by presuming to do away with normative criteria for correctness of assessment: one gets not only an overflowing ontology for which assertion is always a boon, never a handicap, but also must shoulder an irresolvable explanatory burden. In Badiou's case, we get rather an ontology of identical types, but whose connection to the world is so precarious that it has nothing to say as to *what* exists, or *how* we know this. Having relaxed standards for discernment, the question 'what is Real?' can be all too easily answered by reminding us, like Rorty does, that if we talk about it then it exists.

This is the incredible irony facing Badiou's dialectical system, where despite his precautions against pragmatism, the ontology of multiplicity ultimately ends up becoming just as adequate to the liberal form of relativism, surrendering the Real to whatever conventions we might summon from natural languages at will, or from historical-phenomenological wisdom. Having no clear *normative* criteria, indeed no *theory* of the philosophical meta-ontological ur-decision on whose basis the dialectic proceeds, Badiou cannot but delegate the pertinence of his proposal to surreptitious historical and even phenomenological considerations prescribing a resistance against the tyranny of the One.

Ultimately, nothing tells us how the forms that mathematics *qua* discourse are connected to the material world so that it can assume the role of an ontology/phenomenology.<sup>13</sup> The only thing guaranteeing the connection between such discourse and the world would seem to remain, as Ray Brassier critically notes, *philosophy*, as a kind of transcendental meta-exception dictating the ubiquity of multiple presentation as proper to both ontological (or phenomenological) and non-ontological situations (Brassier 2007). But, as we noted in the beginning, given that there are no events in philosophy, and that the latter produces no truths of its own, the meta-ontological ur-decision must work *without a subject*. Since subjectivation emerges exclusively through the decisional rupture of the event (or its reactive/obscurantist responses), it is clear that there cannot be a philosophical *subject* to do the deciding. Indeed, the meta-ontological decision can only be operative by the hermeneutically inspired, philosophical ur-subject. Yet this is precisely what Badiou's theory of subjectivation was set to avoid, construing agency as a *result* rather than a *condition*. In doing so, the materialist dialectic is forced to choose between a reification of the philosophical subject, vitiating its own strictures, and

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<sup>13</sup> Indeed, it seems that the thesis that being is multiplicity, which conditions the overcoming of ontotheology and the Leibnizean axiom, would be relinquished to the status of foundational mathematics as such. Yet it is less clear today that ZF set theory can operate with the same prerogative apropos mathematics. Some philosophers of mathematics insist that it is necessary to envelop the discursive range of the Cantorian Continuum or Real line into a more robust thinking of the Continuum, to justify its *protean* qualities (including its genericity, reflexivity, and modality). For new approaches to the integration of mathematics contesting the preponderance of the Cantorian 'Real Line', see the post-Peircean approach advocated by Fernando Zalamea (2001).

overtly accepting to have no proper theory of the ontological-situation, leaving its foundational gesture to work as an unexplained explainer. There were the God of the One takes flight, the anonymity of the philosophical decision, subtracted even from the eventual affirmation of the subject, must fill the void.<sup>14</sup>

It is therefore not sufficient to remark, like Žižek, that Badiou's claims to immanence collapse through the *supplement* of the event of truth and subjectivation. More dramatically, the very distinctions between ontology, world and Event all *presuppose* a form of decision without which the very positioning of mathematical ontology *vis* a *vis* its externality cannot be thought. Yet it has become clear that without the boon of phenomenological intuition to play the role of yielding the multiple form of being through sensibility, the meta-ontological decision operates by the rights of philosophical *prescription*. It is philosophy, finally, in its transcendent affirmation of the thesis that mathematics thinks the form of all worldly multiple presentation, that undergirds the immanence of its notional differentiation as ontology as not *just* mathematics. This is the ur-affirmation that animates Badiou's dialectics, and which, as we saw, allows him to determine the priority of a wager, indeed of an axiomatic *decision*, set before the power of negation.

In the last instance, this move cannot but ultimately obviate rather than resolve the problem of the articulation between thought and reality, at a loss when clarifying how mathematization gains traction on being. In order to avoid an explicit representationalism which would reactivate the distinction between form and content Badiou would require to say that reality is somehow 'mathematical' or mathematized before the ontological decision is itself affirmed, and before

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<sup>14</sup> Is this not something like the negative theological version of the Platonist's philosopher-King, or indeed philosopher-God?

mathematics as such develops itself. Doing so, one could then claim that the forms of the real would be given to the intellect, impressing themselves upon the mind, as Wilfrid Sellars would put it, like a seal does on wax. But it becomes apparent then that whatever ‘rationalism’ is at stake here remains all-too Cartesian, where *representings* would be mysteriously given and unexplained, if not ineffable, forcing us to revert to the clairvoyance of ‘clear and distinct’ ideas. As Fraser observes:

“To the extent that a mathematical ontology of concrete situations is possible, it must be possible to treat these as ‘models’ of set theory. Accordingly, these situations must be apprehended as being already mathematical in some sense, however crudely or vaguely understood. To the extent that ontology avoids the ‘empiricist’ mandate of being an ‘imitative craft’ [...] the correspondence between the ontological situation and its outside can be classified as neither a relation of transcendence nor immanence, but must be thought as a point of indiscernibility between the two” (Fraser 2007: 62-65).

Lacking any specifiable difference with respect to other discourses beyond philosophical prescription, and missing a positive epistemology, mathematics is finally silent when securing the materiality of the forms it discerns, and it is not clear how philosophy can overcome such a hurdle without rehabilitating representation.

Is there a possible alternative route, for the dialectic? Is there no other path besides the ontologizing of the intelligible forms of the *matheme*, at the price of evacuating thought's connection with the sensible and the empirical? To overcome the reality of the formal distinction between being and thinking, it seems, we must be able say *how* we are to qualitatively diversify being, so as to describe how thought is different from the world and yet connected to it through sensation. Could an

alternative route be perhaps then to resist Plato, Hegel and Badiou, by insisting on the merely discursive status of the forms of intellection, while recognizing in turn the reality of the qualitative and the sensible? Could we acknowledge the *reality of appearances*, and the positive ontological status of sensibility, without thereby rendering reality *wholly* sensible, and so without tipping over into another furious idealism or vitalism? Can we preserve the powers of the negative without compromising materialism? How, finally, can the rationalist dialectic be resolutely *materialist* without having to settle for the epistemic opacity of the formal distinction between thinking and being?<sup>15</sup> These questions linger on at the heart of the hope for a third epoch of the dialectic.

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<sup>15</sup> Such an alternative is pursued in the writings of the American philosopher Wilfrid Sellars; whose astonishing work sought to reconcile a thoroughbred nominalism about abstract entities with a robust scientific realism about natural processes. See Wilfrid Sellars (1998).

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