

member of the community has a fully developed deliberative competence – democratic institutions and liberties actually enhance the pursuit of human flourishing. But in non-ideal conditions – in which some members of the community have not had equal opportunities to develop their deliberative capacities – democratic institutions and liberties can sometimes pose threats to the perfectionist goal. For instance, though Mill saw himself, with good reason, as a friend of the working classes, this friendship was mixed with doubts about their present intellectual and moral abilities. Their inferiority was not a natural condition, and Mill hoped to improve their condition by better education and greater scope for civic participation. This commitment to improving the lot of the working classes, however, was tempered by concerns about letting them dominate civic matters in their current backward state. This requires Mill and other classical liberals to develop a conception of Liberal Elitism for nonideal theory that allows the progressive influence of elites and elite culture within a social and political system regulated by liberal essentials. Skorupski recognizes and explores the problem of Liberal Elitism in subtle terms.

Skorupski's essays do not articulate a systematic moral and political theory. But they do take a fresh look at central issues about ethical objectivity, distributive justice, the nature of the good, the relation between moral judgment and the emotions, and the nature of and prospects for political liberalism in ways that are informed by a sensibility steeped in the culture and ideas of eighteenth and nineteenth century philosophy. Anyone interested in such issues should read Skorupski's essays with interest and profit.

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***Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, by Alain Badiou, translated by Peter Hallward. London: Verso, 2001, xlvii + 162 pp.
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Alain Badiou, who teaches philosophy at the *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris, is a former student and close associate of the late Louis Althusser, and has been a maoist activist for the past thirty-five years or so. His early theoretical work dealt primarily with issues in the philosophy of mathematics. This volume contains a translation of a short book on ethics (91 pages), addressed to pupils in the French secondary school system and university students, plus an 'Interview on Politics and Philosophy' which Badiou gave to the translator of the volume. The original version of the book has been a huge commercial success since its publication in France in 1998.

This book is very clearly written, and the keen intelligence and intense, focused intellectual energy of its author are manifest on every page. It provides a view of moral and political philosophy that is highly suggestive and radically different from anything else I have ever seen in the literature. Given its brevity and the complexity of the theory it seeks to outline, there are any number of issues on which one would like further clarification, but despite its sketchiness it is by far the most interesting work of philosophy I have read in the past decade or two.

Badiou claims that the increasing global power of the capitalist economic system since

1989 has brought with it the dominance of a particular moral theory which he calls 'the ethical ideology' (pp. liii–lvi, 90). The more destructive capitalism becomes, the more it needs apparently high-minded forms of preaching and theorising as a supplement to itself. This supplement presents itself as a way of dealing with the 'excesses' of capitalism, but is in fact an integral part of its further development. The dominant 'ethical ideology' is a complex construct containing a variety of different strands and components. In this book Badiou analyses and criticises a number of these strands, and presents his own alternative positive account of ethics.

One major component of 'the ethical ideology' is a certain conception of the contrast between Evil and Good (pp. 8–10). 'Evil' is thought to have conceptual, moral, and political priority over 'good'. The good is assumed to be complexly pluralistic, highly variable, difficult to discern, and even more difficult to secure agreement on; it is thus an inherently obscure topic for philosophy and at least *prima facie* always a potentially problematic goal for large-scale politics. Evil, on the contrary, is assumed to be the same everywhere and to be clearly and easily identified and well-defined; it is possible to get clear universal principles which will allow one to avoid it. Who knows whether it is better to build more motorways or more railways? Murder, on the other hand, is always clearly wrong. This doctrine is usually tacitly associated with a degrading philosophical anthropology which sees man as essentially a victim or rather as '*the being who can recognize himself as a victim*' (p. 10). Thus, proponents of 'the ethical ideology' argue, the right way to go about ethics is to begin by formulating the universal abstract rules that tell us how we must act in order to avoid Evil, postponing discussion of the good or even leaving conceptions of the good up to individual choice (within the limits marked out by the absolute requirement that one avoid Evil).

Badiou thinks this whole approach is completely wrong: Evil is not anything like a free-standing property that could be the object of autonomous investigation. Neither is evil everywhere the same or in any sense inherently easier to recognise than good. Rather Evil is always both conceptually and practically parasitic on good; one can't understand evil except as a perversion of a good, and one can't act so as simply to prevent evil, but only to avoid evil while in pursuit of some good. The basic phenomenon with which ethics should deal is that of the way in which people pursue some good, and the basic task of an ethics is to encourage people to continue in their pursuit of some good (pp. 16, 48–52, 67, 71). Since the forms which the pursuit of the good takes are manifold, there will be a corresponding plurality of different 'ethics', not a single universal doctrine (p. 40). The claim that 'there can be no ethics in general, but only. . . an ethic relative to a particular situation' (p. lvi) is of central importance to Badiou and recurs a number of times in different variants throughout the book (pp. lvi, 16, 28, 40, etc.). Evil is just the name for one or another of the possible ways in which the pursuit of the good can go off the rails or become perverted; evil 'arises as the (*possible*) effect of the Good itself' (p. 61). The plurality of goods also means that there will be no possible universal theory of evil either. If ethics is essentially about keeping people on track in their pursuit of the good, making it possible for them to 'continue' or to 'keep on going' (pp. 67, 79), to maintain a fidelity to a certain conception of the good, then a *part* of this is to prevent processes of pursuing the good from degenerating into something evil, but this will be a derivative and subsidiary part.

Conceptions of the good arise, Badiou holds, from what he calls 'events' (pp. 16, 40–42). These events, in turn, are the origins of certain 'processes of truths' (pp. 42–44, 50–51). Both 'event' and 'truth' are used as technical terms. An 'event' in Badiou's technical sense is a singular, unpredictable occurrence which 'compels us to decide {to adopt, RG} a *new* way of being' (p. 41) or to '*invent* a new way of being and acting in the situation' (p. 42).

Badiou's examples of 'events' are things like political, scientific, or artistic revolutions (the French Revolution, the work of Galileo in physics, Schönberg's music (p. 41)), religious transformations (the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (pp. 122–4)) or an emotional encounter that changes someone's life (what Badiou calls a 'personal amorous passion' (p. 41)). An event, then, is an occurrence that impresses itself on people in such a way that they experience it as imposing on them a positive commitment to it and to what it represents, and bringing about a change in their lives so that they act in a certain (new) way. To have a commitment to the event means to see the world and the situations in which we find ourselves from the point of view of the event, or in the light of the event. Thus various agents in 19th century Europe tried to act in a way that would be faithful to a commitment to the French Revolution, Christians in the past have tried to live so as to 'imitate' Christ, various early twentieth century composers tried to write music that developed the new sound possibilities envisaged by Schönberg, etc.

'True' for Badiou does not designate some property of a proposition that, for instance, has been or could be tested and scientifically verified. Rather the basic sense of 'true' is that in which Jesus says of himself that he is the truth. To say that Jesus is the truth is to say that his life is the true life, i.e. the good life, the exemplary life, the life that is a model for humans, the life to which we all should aspire to be faithful. By 'truth (or a truth)', Badiou says, he will mean 'the real process of a fidelity to an event' (p. 42); a 'process of truth' is a historical sequence in which agents try to act in ways that remain faithful to an event.

If I have understood Badiou's view correctly, he thinks it important to reject two mistakes that could be made about conceptions of the good. On the one hand, Badiou thinks that his view is distinct from forms of relativism, in that for him an event, although a singular occurrence, is universal in that it is 'addressed to everyone' (p. 74): anyone can become a Christian, a revolutionary activist, or a devotee of post-Schönbergian music. In addition, the positive commitment which generates a conception of the good, although it is to an event which is and is known to be a singular occurrence, is not to the event in its mere singularity but to something universal which the event represents or instantiates. Thus in the mid-19th century commitment to the French Revolution, correctly understood, did *not* mean (or ought not to have meant) an attempt to act so as to reconstitute all the *specific* institutions or forms of political action associated with the actual course of the Revolution, but to act in the spirit of the Revolution in a way that develops the universal significance of what occurred. Similarly a Christian may believe that the life of Jesus is an exemplary life that is 'addressed to all', the 'truth' of which they must emulate and develop, without thinking that they must imitate every *individual* aspect of that life (speaking Aramaic, never using a telephone, drinking wine rather than beer, etc.). On the other hand, this does not mean that an event contains a universal message that can be definitively formulated once and for all at any given time. Even a true Christian can't necessarily give a complete and definitive *general* account of what 'fidelity to Christ' comprises, and the same is true of the activities inspired by the French Revolution or the post-Schönbergian composer.

Conceptions of the good thus always arise out of particular conversion experiences. Processes of truth make people human subjects of particular kinds. In fact Badiou goes so far as to say that one isn't really a human 'subject' (but merely an animal) if one has not been impressed by an event, felt the pull of fidelity to it, and developed some of conception of the good from it (p. 43). Badiou has an explicitly dualist theory which sees humans as having both instincts directed at self-preservation and a capacity to experience engagements with or commitments to positive conceptions of the apparent good

(pp. 48–55). These positive conceptions of the good might be of a variety of kinds: some ideals of satisfactory relations with particular other people, artistic or scientific projects, political aspirations, etc. Commitment to a good gives rise to a particular kind of interest, which he calls a disinterested interest ('disinterested' because it is not directly connected to self-preservation). Generally in human life we have a variety of such disinterested interests deriving from various sources – I may both find mathematics good and have a commitment to certain political goods. In everyday life under most circumstances these will be confusedly intertwined with interests that derive from self-preservation (pp. 46–8). Usually I will lead my life under conditions in which I can try at any rate to pursue all my interests – those that derive from self-preservation and those that derive from some conception of the good – at the same time, but in certain extreme circumstances – martyrdom is perhaps the most striking instance – the course of action that is required by my conception of the good conflicts with self-preservation. Martyrdom, one might think, is an infrequent occurrence, but the very fact that it is possible, even if rare, shows that self-preservation and its interests cannot be the whole story about human beings, and that disinterested interests exist.

There is, then, no 'universal' ethics common to all human subjects, rather 'ethics' refers in each case to a particular set of beliefs and practices that are associated with a particular process of truth (and the subjects constituted in such processes). In the first instance such 'ethics' is designed to play the positive task of allowing subject to continue in their fidelity to the process of truth that is under way; secondarily it will help prevent the degeneration of such processes into 'evil'.

To be more exact, Badiou distinguishes three kinds of evil. The first kind is betrayal: giving up the truth and choosing biological existence and interests in cases in which the two conflict, for instance the biologist who takes a bribe or succumbs to a threat from a pharmaceutical company to falsify results (thereby betraying his fidelity to the truth of his commitment to his science) (pp. 78–80). The second form of evil is terror exercised in pursuit of a 'simulacrum' (pp. 72–78). A simulacrum is a kind of parody of a true event (p. 75). A process of truth degenerates into this second kind of evil when it fosters faithfulness to a closed, pre-given form of existence with no potentially universal aspect. The major example of this is National Socialism, which was a 'simulacrum' of an event; National Socialism differed from 'real' events, for instance, from the French Revolution in that it could not 'be for all' (p. 73) i.e. it was addressed not to everyone, but only to members of the German *Volk* which was construed as a pre-existent closed biologically based community whose value was posited as fixed. It was thus 'radically incapable of any truth whatever' (p. 73) and could attain only to a universality of destruction of that which was defined as lying outside the positively valued substance of the national community (p. 74).

The third form of evil is 'disaster', which is trying to present a truth one sees as having total power (pp. 71, 80–87). That is, parallel to the binary split in humans between biologically based self-interest and the disinterested interest analysed above, in Badiou's view we can adopt two distinct cognitive and evaluative attitudes toward any given situation. One is the attitude of common sense, 'opinion', colloquial communication, and the usual 'pragmatic' forms of knowledge we have accumulated in order to deal with our everyday world. The other is the view of the situation from the point of view of fidelity to the event. If all goes well, *both* perspectives will be fully available to human agents. Thus a Christian sees a given situation as it is recognised in everyday experience and communication, e.g. two neighbours having a friendly chat over the garden fence. However, the Christian also sees this situation 'in the light of' the event of Christ's intervention in human history; in

doing so the Christian uses a technical vocabulary to describe the situation, for instance, as one in which the 'sin' of lack of charity is being committed (because the neighbours are engaged in malicious gossip). A truth has a certain power in that it helps us to reorganise the realm of everyday forms of knowledge, but any such power is limited. The form of evil which Badiou calls 'disaster' occurs when a given truth is treated as if it had *total* power to reorganise any situation. I take it that this means that the dual point of view somehow gets lost. The 'disastrous' Christian sees *nothing but* sin in the gossiping neighbours; the revolutionary *nothing but* a way in which the capitalist system is reproducing itself (pp. 71, 80–87). The Red Guards who attempted to enforce the suppression of self-interest and 'opinion' in the name of 'truth' during the Cultural Revolution were a disaster. Positivism as the attempt to replace all mere opinion with 'statements of science' is yet another form of 'disaster' (pp. 84–5).

I have focused on the main positive line of argument in this book, but in addition to his rejection of the ideology of universal human rights (pp. 8–10) Badiou also criticises the view that ethics should be directed at some special concern for the Other qua Other (pp. 18–28). He rejects 'identity politics', multiculturalism, the liberal obsession with consensus and any form of 'communicative ethics' (p. 51). The truth for him is always divisive, and a bearer of truth must always be partisan and militant (p. 75). The world of common sense, everyday communication and consensus is a stifling system with an inherent tendency to enforce reprehensible conformity. Truths are precisely what break through this repressive shell. 'A truth-process is heterogeneous to the instituted knowledges of the situation' (p. 43; cf. pp. 70, 75). The very idea of a universal truth embodied in a shared full consensus makes no sense, in part because 'truth is never communicable as such' (p. 70); only opinions are communicable. On this issue, Badiou thinks, both Mallarmé and Gödel point in the same, the right, direction, and Habermas (p. 56 n. 2) is facing squarely in the wrong direction.

In conclusion, Badiou's focus on the processes by which people become involved in projects directed at the attainment of distinct goods, rather than on the general avoidance of 'evil', is highly refreshing, as is his emphasis on positive identification with exemplary individuals and events rather than on rule-following. He makes an extremely persuasive case for construing ethics not as a purportedly unitary free-standing discipline but as a subordinate part of politics on the one hand, and of human personal life on the other.

On various points I would have liked further elucidation. First I am slightly unclear about the exact relation between what Badiou calls 'truth' and what he calls 'knowledge', and secondly I would have liked a more extensive discussion of the concepts of 'generality' and 'universality' that play such a strikingly suggestive role in his philosophy. I believe these issues are discussed at greater length in his *L'être et l'événement* (Paris: Seuil 1988). One could also wonder whether Badiou's three categories of 'Evil' really exhausted the possible ways in which a process of truth could be seriously derailed. Finally one might wonder if events like individual amorous encounters really can as easily be fit into a framework derived from the study of politics, religion, and the history of science, as Badiou sometimes seems to suggest. Despite these minor queries, Badiou's book strikes me as a major achievement that deserves to be widely studied.

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