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Edited by

J. Jeremy Wisniewski

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MATHEMATICS, ONTOLOGY, AND POLITICS: THE WORK OF ALAIN BADIOU

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Abstract

With just a few exceptions Alain Badiou's work has been ignored or routinely dismissed by Anglophone philosophers and discussed at any length – or with an adequate knowledge of his large and demanding *oeuvre* – only by cultural and critical theorists. This is unfortunate in various ways, not least because Badiou is himself a philosopher by training and avocation, and also because his thinking is some of the most resourceful, inventive and potentially fecund (as well as most technically and conceptually demanding) to be found in present-day philosophy. Here I offer a summary account of that thinking with particular reference to Badiou's highly original work in the philosophy of mathematics and, more specifically, his exploration of those far-reaching ontological issues raised by developments in post-Cantorian set theory. His approach is more ambitious and adventurous than the kinds of discussion mostly carried on by analytically trained philosophers although – I should stress – none the less rigorous or mathematically accomplished for that. Indeed, when compared with most work in that 'other' (analytic) tradition, Badiou's shows a much higher degree of intellectual creativity as well as a far greater depth of engagement with the 'truth-procedures' (that is, the heuristics of problem-solving and paradox-resolution) that have typified the progress of set-theoretical methods and concepts.

My essay then goes on to explain – again with a view to allaying suspicions in the analytic camp – how Badiou can make the seemingly unwarranted leap from philosophy of mathematics, *via* a set-theoretically grounded ontology, to questions (some of them urgently topical) in the socio-political and ethical domains. Most significant here is the cardinal distinction – as in the title of his major book *Being and Event* – between the realm of ontology or that which pertains to some existing, pre-

constituted order of things and the realm of events or that which transpires in such a way as to radically disrupt, transform, or revolutionize the existing order. It is by way of this distinction that Badiou is able to argue his case for mathematics as the basis for a critical ontology not only of the formal and physical sciences but also of those social and political projects where progressive or emancipatory thinking is likewise bound up with material constraints

I

Alain Badiou is a French-domiciled Moroccan philosopher (born Rabat, 1937) who studied at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in the late 1950s, then taught at the University of Paris VIII (Vincennes) and returned to the ENS in 1999 to take up the Chair of Philosophy.¹ He has been – and remains – a committed left-wing activist and militant who, unlike many in the wake of *les événements* of 1968, has not renounced his communist beliefs but sought to redefine them with greater precision while devoting his main political energies to extra-parliamentary campaigning on issues such as the treatment of asylum-seekers, ethnic minorities and other oppressed or marginalised groups.² Of his many and varied publications to date Badiou's book *Being and Event* (1988, English trans. 2005) stakes a strong claim as the single most original and challenging work to have appeared on the French philosophical scene during the past twenty years.³

I should say straight off that Badiou's thought is such as to resist and very nearly to defeat the best efforts of summary exposition. Indeed it has a depth, complexity, and range of reference – combined with a degree of conceptual rigour – that no commentator could hope to match. Still it is worth making some attempt since there are many aspects of Badiou's work that are apt to create problems of grasp for the first-time reader. They include his heterodox distinction between truth and knowledge, his likewise unfamiliar conception of truth in relation to issues of ethics and politics, and his idea of the event as a radically disruptive or world-transformative occurrence such as requires unswerving commitment on the part of faithful subjects or 'militants of truth'.⁴ Among the latter are some – like Saint Paul – whose example in this respect Badiou finds very much to his purpose even though he is far from endorsing all or any of their doctrines or articles of faith.⁵ However, what most needs explaining is the role of mathematics (more precisely: of post-Cantor set-theory) as the basis of Badiou's philosophical ontology, that is to say, his approach to the fundamental question: what exists and what are its various structures, modes, or conditions of being? And again: how is it that truth can be

discovered, manifested, or progressively revealed (as realists would claim) when subject to all the changing conditions of cultural or socio-historical time and place? Above all there is the question – central to Badiou’s work – of the relationship between mathematics as the basis of ontological enquiry, philosophy as the discipline that draws out the implications of such enquiry, and those other kinds of theoretical and practical concern that make up philosophy’s field of engagement beyond its more specialized – sometimes its overly self-occupied – interests and pursuits.

These questions go back to the ancient Greek origins of Western speculative thought and also, no doubt, to the sources of every cultural tradition that has taken the turn toward topics of a metaphysical or speculative character. Sufficient to say, for the moment, that Badiou comes at them from a standpoint at once profoundly attuned to those ancient sources and utterly distinctive in its own right. The attunement results from his engaging with problems – such as those of the one and the many, stasis and change, or (most crucially for Badiou’s enterprise) the order of being and the order of events – which received their earliest incisive statement in the thinking of ancient Greek philosophers like Parmenides, Zeno, Heraclitus, Plato, and Aristotle. The distinctiveness has to do with his approaching them in a manner that draws upon various latter-day resources – principally those of set theory but also including Marxism, psychoanalysis, philosophy of science, and poetics – through a highly inventive synthesis that also displays an uncommon degree of conceptual and logical rigour. Indeed, it is Badiou’s most emphatic claim that philosophy still has its work cut out despite all the nowadays fashionable talk of its ‘end’ or looming obsolescence. Nevertheless, he insists, that work is best done by maintaining a close and mutually productive contact with those other disciplines while refusing to be taken over by them or annexed to their own distinct aims and priorities.

Such has been the fate of philosophy at least since Hegel: to find itself invaded from various adjacent regions of thought with which it has a constant need to engage (since they define its very ‘conditions’ or means of involvement beyond its specialist domain) but from which it must always keep a certain distance so as preserve its autonomy and critical-emancipatory edge. As I have said those conditions are science, politics, art, and love, all of them conceived (reasonably enough) as basic components of human knowledge and experience whose special mark – what singles them out from the range of other possible candidates – is the fact that they involve a commitment to truth in its various modalities on the part of subjects for whom that truth is in some sense constitutive of their very being. ‘Examples’, Badiou writes: ‘the appearance, with

Aeschylus, of theatrical tragedy; the irruption, with Galileo, of mathematical physics; an amorous encounter which changes a whole life; the French Revolution of 1792.’ It is at junctures like these that the subject quite literally comes into existence as one who decides who decides to ‘wager’ on the truth of that event, or to take it as an axiom and follow out its consequences to the limit and (maybe) beyond. Thus philosophy has no choice but to address those four ‘conditions’ and define its project in response to their various, sometimes conflictual demands even if, by so doing, it is perpetually at risk of losing that critical distance. Amongst the temptations to which it has periodically been prone are scientific positivism, psychoanalysis in its more imperious (anti-philosophical) forms, poetic meditation when exalted (as by Heidegger) to a vatic or revelatory role, and political theory when likewise granted the kind of precedence that would keep philosophy very much in its subordinate place.

Badiou’s way of countering this threat is to insist that philosophy take full account of developments in those other spheres while continuing to honour its ancient Greek inheritance as the discipline of thought whose proper task it is to draw out the various relationships between them. Beyond that, it has the task – one central to his own project – of explaining precisely how each bears witness to the polarity of being and event, or ontology and that which eludes or exceeds any specification in ready-to-hand ontological terms. All the same, as he is equally keen to stress, this sense of a distinctive vocation should not be taken as a licence for philosophers to fix their sights too high and hence to disengage from the business of reflecting on matters of real-world political and ethical concern.⁶ For one of its more urgent responsibilities in the context of present-day socio-cultural-political developments is to hold out against what Badiou sees as the near-ubiquitous process of decline by which science degenerates into mere technique, politics into management, art into culture (or the ‘cultured’ discourse on or around art), and love into sexuality conceived as something like a synthesis of technique, management, and perpetual self-adjustment to perceived cultural norms. It is largely in order to resist this trivializing process – and also to resist philosophy’s recruitment through sundry complicitous movements of thought, from hermeneutics, post-structuralism and postmodernism to the ‘ordinary-language’ and (some, not all) analytic schools – that Badiou presents his radical re-thinking of ontology *vis-à-vis* the unpredictable and world-transformative ‘event’ of truth.

Being and Event itself lays claim, immodestly but I think justifiably enough, to constitute just such a major event in the history of philosophic

thought. Of course any claim of this order cannot be adequately gauged or assessed except through a sustained engagement with the text itself and a willingness, on the reader's part, to set aside the various kinds of prejudice – including those derived from very different conceptions of philosophy's proper role – that may well operate to block or to skew that engagement. What follows is of course no substitute for it but aims at least to prepare the way by dismantling a few of the prejudices.

II

What I have said so far should already make it clear that Badiou's project has little in common with other current modes of philosophical thinking, whether in the mainstream analytic (chiefly Anglo-American) or 'continental' (mainland-European) lines of descent. On the one hand it displays an ambitiousness and speculative range – especially in its treatment of mathematical themes – that will surely strike most analytic philosophers as well beyond the limits of intellectual propriety. On the other, as they would soon find out if persuaded to read him, Badiou's deployment of set-theoretical concepts, methods and proof-procedures has a rigour and degree of logical precision fully equal to anything achieved by thinkers in that other tradition.⁷ Where his approach most notably contrasts with theirs is in its claim for mathematics as the basis of a general ontology with decisive implications for our thinking about issues across a great range of subject areas, from the natural sciences (unsurprisingly) to politics, ethics, aesthetics, and love. If this last term – here and on its previous appearance – caused my reader something of a jolt then this may perhaps serve as a useful measure of the extent to which Badiou's work challenges the norms of conventional academic discourse. After all, there is precedent going back at least to Plato for a link between philosophy of mathematics and philosophy of ethics, politics and art, even if the precise nature of that link – or its validity when subject to different, presumptively more rigorous standards of analysis – is nowadays considered far from self-evident. However, with respect to love, the fact of its having figured as a stage on the path to philosophic wisdom in Plato's *Symposium* and other texts will do little to offset the sense of its simply not belonging in a series that includes those other terms.

Yet it is just this notion of 'belonging' – and its precise relationship to that of 'inclusion' – that Badiou asks us to reconsider in the light of post-Cantorian set theory and the various problems it has had to confront in its development to date. Thus one of the most productive (though counter-intuitive) results of this development was the power-set axiom whereby it

was established that the sub-sets of any given set would out-number the cardinality of that set by a ratio that increased exponentially and which also applied to the multiple orders of infinite (or transfinite) numbers.⁸ That is to say, the members taken as *belonging* to a certain set will always be exceeded – sometimes massively so – by the constituent parts or the entities *included* in that set as a matter of everything that makes it up on whatever counting system. This discrepancy or disproportion between what is taken as truly or rightfully the case with regard to some existing situation and what it may harbour in the way of so-far unrecognised (i.e., included but non-belonging) sub-sets is a main theme of Badiou's writing and one that provides him with a bridge from mathematics to other (among them political) regions of enquiry. For instance, it gives him a strong point of purchase on the issue concerning the *sans-papiers* or immigrant workers whose vital contribution to the national economy (quite apart from their entitlement to due respect as human beings) counts for nothing in so far as they lack recognition by the state.⁹ Badiou offers various terms by which to grasp the structure and workings of this discrepancy, among them the distinction between *members* and *parts* (where the parts always more numerous) and that between the *situation* and the *state of the situation*, where the latter contains everything excluded by the 'official' or currently legitimised count-as-one. What is counted-as-one is that which falls under any system – mathematical, political or other – whereby certain parts are treated as members in good standing while no such status is granted to those that fall outside it for this or that reason.

Hence Badiou's further distinction between 'inconsistent' and 'consistent' multiplicities, the former taken as ontologically prior since they include the full range of elements along with all possible relations between them rather than just the current (selective or exclusionary) order of membership. Thus Badiou takes his stand very much on the side of those pre-Socratic thinkers like Anaximander, Heraclitus and Empedocles for whom the one – that is, any principle of ultimate unity or reconciliation – must be seen as a fictive or illusory construct imposed upon an endlessly various, manifold, and shape-shifting reality. By the same token he comes out against those latter-day followers of Parmenides and Plato according to whom the one (in whatever derivative guise) is that which provides the grounding principle, the touchstone of reason or truth, and hence the basis for any reckoning with an otherwise unruly and unknowable multiplicity. So it is – on account of its raising this issue in an especially sharp and unavoidable way – that Badiou makes his claim for set theory as the discourse wherein one can best descry the various political structures of inclusion and exclusion. Or again, it enables the distinction to be drawn

between that which is *presented* as part of a certain situation and that which may or may not be *represented* depending on whether it ‘properly’ belongs or qualifies for membership on terms laid down by the socially, politically or culturally dominant count-as-one. Badiou declares himself frankly impatient with mathematicians who would reject any such argument as merely an abusive extrapolation from their specialist subject-domain. On the other hand he is equally impatient with political philosophers and cultural theorists who take the supposedly ‘abstract’ character of mathematics and formal logic to justify their holding out against its claim on their attention. For it is just his point, and again one that most analytic philosophers would balk at, that the process should properly work both ways so that mathematicians have as much to gain by reflecting on these wider ontological implications of their work as philosophers have by acquainting themselves with developments in set theory.

Thus Badiou’s philosophy of mathematics has a crucial bearing – albeit at a carefully specified remove – on his thinking about issues of politics, art, science, and love. These subject-areas must each be taken as exhibiting a distinctive relationship to truth, and hence as each requiring a different approach with regard to the radical dichotomy of being and event. Yet there is also a profound kinship between them in so far as each involves the irruption of a new and unprecedented kind of occurrence whose effect is to re-define the conditions – the terms of ‘fidelity’ or rigorous following-through – for subsequent thought or action. Just as truth surpasses the capacity of knowledge (since knowledge has to do with pre-established standards or criteria of judgement) so fidelity ensues upon certain events that transcend any previously adequate order of conceptual, ethical, techno-scientific, socio-political, or aesthetic representation. Where philosophy comes in is *not* as any kind of master-discourse that would somehow speak the truth of those other subject-areas from a higher adjudicative standpoint but rather as a discourse of critical reflection on and through their various specific sites or modes of practical engagement. Above all, its task is to point up the difference between *truth* as that which commands the allegiance of subjects beyond their current-best powers of ascertainment, proof or understanding and *knowledge* as that which by very definition falls within the bounds of achieved human cognisance. Thus the state of knowledge at any given time has this much in common with the state as a political entity: that it defines and constrains what legitimately counts as a proper object of cognitive enquiry or a legitimate subject whose status is a matter of meeting certain authorised or laid-down membership conditions. If the event – as Badiou defines it – is strictly

unthinkable in ontological terms then this is because it initiates a radical change in what henceforth counts as a truth-conducive, scientifically warranted, politically enlightened, ethically just, or good-faith mode of proceeding.

This helps to explain his on the face of it improbable claim that set-theory is the only adequate means of re-thinking the relationship between being and event so as to leave sufficient room for an outlook of political activism and also for the prospect of genuinely innovative thinking in science, ethics, and the arts. Mathematics enjoys this privileged position not (to repeat) as some kind of master-discourse dispensing truths from a realm of absolute ideal objectivity outside and above the realm of contingent, might-have-been-others events. Rather it serves to explain – by something more than suggestive analogy – how thought can transcend the limiting conditions of its own historically or culturally situated time and place. What set-theory is able to account for through its dealing with the various (often problematical) concepts of inclusion, belonging, and self-reference is the tension that exists between an ‘inconsistent multiplicity’ of subjects whose interests may or may not be acknowledged by the state and the ‘count-as-one’ by which the state identifies all and only those legitimate subjects whose interests it can more or less plausibly claim to represent. It is in this context that Badiou introduces his notion of the ‘void’ as that which occupies the zero-point of being, set-theoretically defined, and which also provides the conceptual bridge to a ‘subtractive’ ontology wherein the condition of absence or lack – that is to say, the representational deficit in any given political system – itself becomes a motivating force in the process by which unjust or oppressive socio-political orders provoke revolutionary change.

The point is nicely made by a passage from his essay ‘Politics Unbound’ where Badiou brings these various themes together in typically sweeping yet precise and by no means vaguely analogical way.

Organised in anticipation of surprises, diagonal to representations, experimenting with lacunae, accounting for infinite singularities, politics is an active thought that is both subtle and dogged, one from which the material critique of all forms of presentative correlation proceeds, and which, operating on the edge of the void, calls on homogeneous multiplicities against the heterogeneous order of the State, which claims to prevent their appearance.¹⁰

Passages like this give a highly articulate but somewhat abstract and generalised account of what Badiou means, in the political context, by his use of mathematically-derived terms such as ‘void’, ‘singularity’, ‘presentative correlation’, ‘homogeneous multiplicity’, and so forth.

However, any suspicion that they serve merely to disguise a lack of detailed historico-political knowledge or engagement is amply dispelled when it comes to his treatment of those signal episodes – chief among them, in many ways, the Paris Commune of 1871 – that constitute genuine ‘evental sites’ in Badiou’s precise sense of the phrase. Thus he fully endorses Marx’s claim that ‘[t]he Commune was . . . the initiation of the Social Revolution of the 19th century’, and that ‘[w]hatever therefore its fate at Paris, it will make *le tour du monde*’ among the international working class as ‘the magic word of delivery’.¹¹ It stands out above other, on the face of it more consequential or momentous events in so far as it marked the emergence of radically new possibilities which remained (and still remain) to be realised but the non-fulfilment of which up to now is no reason to consign them to historical oblivion or consider them of merely anecdotal interest when compared with great events such as the French or Russian Revolutions. According to Badiou, ‘there exists no stronger a transcendental consequence than that of making something appear in a world which had not existed in it previously’.¹² On this reckoning the Paris Commune must be classed among the very greatest of world-political events despite the plain facts – as he grimly records them – of its having broken up in disarray and descended rapidly from the heights of popular power and massed resistance to the depths of bloody repression and brutal farce. For these facts of the matter, though no doubt ‘decisive’ from the standpoint of conventional historiography or hard-headed worldly wisdom, are beside the point when one raises questions concerning the long-term deeper implications or ethico-political significance of the Commune. In this alternative perspective “‘March 18” gets instituted . . . as the exigency of a new political appearing, as forcing an unheard-of transcendental evaluation of the political scene’.¹³

Here we might recall W.H. Auden’s line from his great, although as some (including Auden himself later on) have felt, morally flawed or ambivalent poem ‘Spain 1937’: ‘History to the defeated/May say Alas but cannot help or pardon’. What Badiou proposes in place of this drastically foreshortened outlook – this idea of present success or failure as the be-all or end-all of hope for better things – is a conception of politics that locates the significance of past events not so much in their demonstrable impact on the course of history to date but rather in their standing as singular examples and reminders of that which has yet to be achieved. ‘We can identify a strong singularity’, he writes, ‘by the fact that, for a given situation, it has the consequence of making an inexistent term exist in it.’¹⁴ How this relates to Badiou’s understanding of the relevant set-theoretical concepts – principally those of the void and inconsistent *vs.* consistent

multiplicity – is a topic that I have broached already but will later discuss in more detail. The most important point to make in this context is that the Commune figures as one of those strictly nonpareil events or eventual sites which could neither be predicted before their occurrence/emergence nor explained with the help of received concepts and categories. That is to say, '[t]he value of the site's existence cannot be prescribed from anything in its ontology', since here – as in the case of mathematics – the advent of a radically innovative way of thinking or acting is such as intrinsically to draw upon resources that elude the grasp of any presently existing conceptual, descriptive, or explanatory scheme. Just as set theory has typically advanced through a process of transforming paradox into concept or some newly encountered obstacle into the spur for renewed efforts of creative thought so likewise politics has typically achieved its most significant moments of advance through the kinds of apparent setback or seemingly decisive (even terminal) setback that have been such a prominent feature of its history to date. And just as this process is constantly at risk of betrayal or derailment through the inertial force of received ideas so likewise the post-history of any event – in Badiou's strongly evaluative sense of that term – will always most likely be subject to evasions, distortions, or betrayals that none the less allow its true import to appear through a reading (like that which he devotes to the Paris Commune) sufficiently attuned to its 'singularity' as just such a signal event.

March 18th 1871 is therefore an eventual site 'because it imposes itself on all the elements that help to bring about its existence as that which, on the basis of the indistinct content of worker-being, "forcibly" calls for a whole new transcendental evaluation of the latter's intensity'.¹⁵ The word 'forcibly' bears something like its everyday meaning but also a more specific (and specialised) set-theoretical sense which, again, I shall return to later. Meanwhile it is worth noting that the major theme of Badiou's highly detailed and also highly partisan (that is to say politically, ethically, and philosophically involved) writing on the Paris Commune is the way that this event stands strikingly opposed to the subsequent history of compromise or sell-out whereby working-class movements have been hijacked by the parliamentary 'socialist' or even 'communist' left. This in turn goes along with his vehement rejection of present-day accommodationist strategies on the part of nominally left-wing parties and his decision to make common cause with those on the extra-parliamentary communist left who represent or embody that 'worker-being' that he invokes when discussing the Paris Commune. 'Today's task, being undertaken notably by the Organisation Politique, is to support the

creation of such a discipline subtracted from the grip of the state, the creation of a thoroughly political discipline'.¹⁶ And it is precisely this 'subtractive' component – whatever doesn't count or has to be discounted according to some dominant conception – that, according to Badiou, can be seen to constitute the driving force of every major advance in every major field of human creative (whether artistic, ethical, political, natural-scientific, or mathematical) endeavour. Like all such landmark events, he writes, 'the Commune had not *realized* a possible, it had created one. This possible is simply that of an independent proletarian politics.'¹⁷

Thus the failure of the Commune – its having been put down in blood and fire, not to mention those near-farcical aspects of its ending that have struck even the most sympathetic and politically well-disposed commentators – is a matter of all-too-plain historical fact but not one that in any sense revokes or invalidates its creation of a new possibility. Indeed Badiou goes so far as to posit the existence of something like an inverse relation between what history routinely treats as major or truly consequential episodes and those which merit just a footnote or passing mention. Hence his cryptic proposal that a *fact* should be defined for such purposes as 'a site whose intensity of existence is not maximal', while the term *singularity* designates a site that does bear witness to such maximal 'intensity'. Among the many illustrative contrasts offered by Badiou is that between the Commune (or March 18th 1871) as a striking and utterly 'singular' example of the latter and the date of September 4th 1870 which marked the collapse of Second Empire and inauguration of the Third Republic. This is not, as Badiou points out, a matter of the politics or class-allegiance of those most directly involved since on that occasion also it was the working people of Paris who marched under a red flag, 'illegally' occupied strategic buildings, and showed every sign of gearing up for a full-scale violent confrontation. What sets it apart from a genuinely epochal event such as the Commune is the fact that 'September 4 was to be confiscated by bourgeois politicians primarily concerned to re-establish the order of property, while the Commune, Lenin's ideal referent, will inspire a century of revolutionary thought'.¹⁸ In this respect it stands as a veritable emblem of the seemingly inexorable process by which any major innovation or radical departure from the norms of a dominant political order will at length be drawn back into established modes of party-based 'representative' pseudo-democracy.

III

So, to recall Auden once again, if history indeed says ‘Alas’ to the defeated of the Commune – as likewise to those of the Spanish Civil War – then it is not so much a question as to whether they can now be ‘helped or pardoned’ with the dubious (scarcely encouraging) benefit of hindsight but rather a question as to what remains, after and despite such knowledge, of the prospects for social and political transformation held out by the event. Where orthodox history comes back with the confident answer ‘Nothing whatsoever!’, Badiou invokes a different historiography whose difference consists not only in its cleaving to a sharply opposed political valuation of events but also in its radically divergent sense of just what constitutes the true (as distinct from the retrospectively censored) order of relationship between an event and its aftermath. Moreover, he devotes some passages of detailed and intricate, at times mathematically-based argument to the task of setting that relationship out in terms of the varying degrees of ‘intensity’ that establish a more-or-less tight or rigorous – subjectively speaking, a more-or-less binding or obligatory – linkage of the kind here at stake.¹⁹

Thus in the context of politics as in those of mathematics and the physical sciences it is always – according to Badiou – a matter of truths that are fully objective in so far as they transcend any merely *de facto* state of knowledge or belief but whose discovery, maintenance, and later development involve an irreducibly subjective component of fidelity, that is, of *truth* to the epochal event in question. As Badiou puts it in one of his most resounding statements:

[t]he proclamations of the Commune, the first worker power in universal history, comprise a historic existent whose absoluteness manifests the coming to pass in the world of a wholly new ordering of its appearing, a mutation of its logic. The existence of an inexistent aspect is that by which, in the domain of appearing, the subversion of worldly being by subjacent being is played out. It is the logical marking of a paradox of being, an ontological paradox.²⁰

So likewise with regard to the history of science in its various specialist fields or disciplinary domains where any major paradigm-shift will occur as the upshot of a heterodox truth-procedure that exists to begin with only through fidelity to a barely discernible (since unpredictable) event. This event must be thought of as eluding any means of prior ontological or conceptual specification since it breaks altogether with existing standards of accredited knowledge or representation. Moreover – Badiou claims – there is a close and not merely fanciful analogy between

the kind of fidelity that keeps enquirers on the path of scientific truth or political justice and the kind that leaves its mark on certain significant (especially erotic) human encounters. What these instances all have in common is the occurrence of a truth-event that, when it first appears, finds no place within the range of admissible facts, theorems, hypotheses, ethical precepts, or inter-subjective commitments.

Let me stress once again – for those of a sceptical mind – that Badiou's treatment of set theory in its technical, i.e., logico-mathematical as well as its wider philosophic aspects is highly impressive for its depth, lucidity, and strength of intellectual grasp. Thus anyone who comes to *Being and Event* with a vague recollection of the subject from school days and otherwise little in the way of background knowledge will leave it – if their reading is sufficiently attentive – with a much improved understanding of the maths along with a keenly developed sense of how it relates to those other truth-conditions under which its logic can be seen to unfold. Indeed one could claim with ample warrant from his writings that rigour of thought is a prime ethical value for Badiou as well as a matter of philosophic, intellectual, and academic-professional responsibility. The most striking example is his brief but intensely admiring commentary on the life and work of Jean Cavaillès, a young mathematician who showed exceptional courage as a member of the French Resistance and, in consequence, was captured, tortured and shot by the occupying Nazi forces. What most impresses Badiou about Cavaillès' actions is the fact that, on all the evidence, they were performed not so much out of moral conscience, love of country, or personal heroism but rather as the upshot of clear-headed logical thinking with regard to the wartime situation and his own best, most effective way of affecting the course of events.

Any attempt to relate Cavaillès' philosophical outlook with his Resistance activities has to face the 'apparent enigma', as Badiou terms it, that 'Cavaillès was working quite some way from political theory or committed existentialism, in the field of pure mathematics'.²¹ Moreover he himself had a good deal to say, in his more philosophical writings, about the need to renounce any remnant of the old intuition-based or consciousness-oriented way of construing mathematical thought and in stead adopt a more austere conception whereby it is identified with purely logical, formal, or conceptual procedures. Yet this is just the point, according to Badiou: that 'Cavaillès was resistant *by logic*' (a phrase that he borrows from Georges Canguilhem), and hence that in such a case any question of distinguishing motives from reasons, or personal from political considerations, or indeed the circumstantial causes of actions from the

principles and values embodied in those same actions becomes merely otiose or misconceived.

This ‘by logic’ contains the connection between philosophical rigour and the political prescription. It is not moral concern or, as we say nowadays, ethical discourse that have, it seems, produced the greatest figures of philosophy as resistance. The concept appears to have been a better guide on this matter than consciousness or spirituality.²²

And again: ‘a Resistance figure “by logic” obeys an axiom, or an injunction, which he formulates in his own name, and whose major consequences he lays out, without waiting to win over other people, in the objective group to which he belongs’.²³ In this connection Badiou, like Cavaillès before him, singles out Spinoza as the greatest exemplar of a thinking that acknowledged the extent of the intellect’s subjection to various kinds of necessity, among them those of its physical embodiment, its historical or socio-cultural situation, and (not least) the manifold sources of formative, even determinative influence that have shaped its development.²⁴ To acknowledge so much – in marked opposition to the emphasis on freedom, autonomy, and conscience that has typified post-Kantian moral debate – is (again like Spinoza) to adopt a very different view of the relationship between on the one hand mathematics, logic and the formal as well as the physical sciences and, on the other, philosophy in its ethical and socio-political dimensions.

Badiou takes issue with Spinoza on various grounds, notably concerning the Spinozist conception of a thoroughly monistic ontology wherein ‘mind’ and ‘nature’ are merely two attributes of a self-same substance that includes and determines every occurrence in both of these parallel or strictly indissociable domains. Thus any ‘event’ – in Badiou’s distinctive sense of that term – would be put down to the illusion of freedom or independent agency created by our relative lack of knowledge with regard to the operative causal forces or motivating factors involved. Badiou devotes some probing pages of *Being and Event* to a careful teasing-out of the problems and tensions that result from Spinoza’s attempt to make good this radically determinist conception while none the less allowing – or seeming to allow – sufficient room for the cultivation of active (or ‘joyful’) as distinct from passive (or ‘sad’) emotions. Still he is very much in sympathy with Spinoza as regards the idea that what are usually taken as moral virtues manifested in action through the exercise of autonomous will can more plausibly (or less self-deludingly) be treated as issuing from a no doubt unfathomably complex concatenation of causal, circumstantial and rational-deliberative factors. Hence Badiou’s tribute to

Cavaillès as an avatar of the same Spinozist tradition, that is, the somewhat exclusive tradition of those whose fidelity took the form of a clear-headed and resolute acceptance of necessity linked with the courage of their own moral and political beliefs.

It is the same combination of jointly intellectual, moral and personal qualities that Badiou admires in those various thinkers across a great range of disciplines – mathematics, physics, philosophy of science, logic, ethics, political theory, psychoanalysis, philosophy of art, and poetics – whose sole common attribute is just this commitment to a truth that cannot (so to speak) be cashed out in the present or known as a matter of demonstrative warrant on the best evidence to hand. What he seeks to bring out, most of all through the sequence of set-theoretical meditations in *Being and Event*, is the way that thinking is inexorably drawn beyond the limits of intuitive, received, or orthodox, knowledge by the effect of those at present barely discernible conflicts or anomalies whose long-term consequences cannot yet be grasped even though they exert a constantly unsettling or destabilising pressure. This is, for Badiou, undoubtedly a matter of truth – of truth in a sense irreducible to any linguistic or constructivist account – yet also a matter of subjective fidelity in so far as the subject is here defined precisely in terms of such intensive commitment to bearing out the truth (or perhaps the falsehood) of the theorem, proposition, or hypothesis in question. Thus:

I call *fidelity* the set of procedures which discern, within a situation, those multiples whose existence depends upon the introduction into circulation (under the supernumerary name conferred by an intervention) of an eventual multiple. In sum, a fidelity is the apparatus which separates out, within the set of presented multiples, those which depend upon an event.²⁵

To which he adds – lest this be taken as implying any kind of subjectivist or psychologistic approach – that ‘a fidelity is always particular, in so far as it depends on an event’, that ‘there is no general faithful disposition’, that it ‘must not be understood . . . as a capacity, a subjective quality, or a virtue’, and should be thought of rather as consisting in ‘a functional relation to the event’.²⁶ All of which suggests that Badiou aligns himself firmly with that realist or objectivist conception of mathematical truth that Frege defended against what he saw as the creeping malaise of a subjectivist outlook represented by the project of Husserlian phenomenology.²⁷ However, as we have seen, this would be to ignore the presence of that countervailing emphasis in Badiou’s work on what has to be called (for want of a better, less misleading term) the *subjective* component that is always bound up with any faithful and

rigorous commitment to establishing the truth of certain theorems, conjectures, or hypotheses. For it is just his point – brought out with particular force in his writing about Cavaillès but also implicit in his own more ‘technical’ mathematico-philosophical work – that the appeal to subjectivity in this context-specific and carefully delineated sense has nothing in common with those psychologistic tendencies that Frege claimed to expose and discredit in the project of Husserlian phenomenology.

I have argued at length elsewhere that Frege got Husserl seriously wrong in this regard and that his misapprehension has badly distorted the subsequent history of relations between ‘analytic’ and ‘continental’ thought.²⁸ Suffice it to say that that a chief motivation of Badiou’s work in philosophy of mathematics and other fields has been to challenge the very idea that there can or should exist such a drastic distinction between rigour, objectivity, and truth on the one hand and commitment, fidelity, and truthfulness on the other.²⁹ Along with this goes his likewise principled refusal to accept any version of the widely-held idea – mostly put about by analytic philosophers – that the virtues of conceptual rigour and logical precision simply don’t mix with the kind of thinking (more typical of work in the ‘continental’, i.e., post-Kantian mainland-European line of descent) that stresses the virtues of speculative range or inventiveness. On the contrary: the most remarkable feature of *Being and Event* is the way that it manages to bring together a sustained and highly original meditation on the history of Western philosophy from Plato to the present with a first-rate critical-expository account of developments in post-Cantorian set-theory and also an adventurous, imaginative, at times well-nigh visionary sense of intellectual and political vocation. Certainly the contrast will strike any reader who approaches *Being and Event* with expectations primed by acquaintance with the kind of debate that typifies philosophy of mathematics in the mainstream analytic tradition. In that context the agenda is far more tightly defined – for the most part concerned with issues such as rule-following and the realism *versus* anti-realism dispute – and often restricted to a far more basic or elementary range of working examples or ‘problem’-cases. Thus it typically turns on questions like ‘what does or should count as “following a rule” given the need for some higher-order rule that determines the first-order standard of rule-following correctness’, and so on, or ‘what can be the status of mathematical “objects” such as numbers, sets or classes given that, if objectively conceived, they must *ipso facto* be thought of as transcending the utmost limits of human knowability?’.³⁰

To be sure, Badiou has a good deal to say on these and related topics, some of it quite capable of showing them up in a new and highly revealing

philosophical light. My point is simply to remark that his take on them involves a degree of speculative freedom (rather than licence) that goes well beyond the limits laid down by received analytical ideas of what counts as serious, constructive, or genuinely problem-solving philosophy of mathematics. Yet Badiou is very clear in *Being and Event* that if there is one lesson to be learned from developments in post-Cantorian set-theory it is the fact that they can only be grasped – or yield anything like their full measure of mathematical as well as philosophic insight – on condition that thinking be prepared to explore regions of speculative ontology beyond those preconceived limits. Such, he maintains, is the chief advance brought about by this way of thinking as compared with previous, vaguely formulated ideas concerning the relationship between mathematics and some ultimate order of reality or truth. It is because that relationship is here conceived as always and by its very nature involving a passage beyond what is presently knowable toward those truths that are offered to thought through a process of often highly speculative yet not, for that reason, any less disciplined or rigorous enquiry.

Indeed the distinction between knowledge and truth – between what *counts* as ‘knowledge’ at some given stage in the history of knowledge-acquisition and what *will or counterfactually would* so count once all the evidence is in – is absolutely central to Badiou’s claim for mathematics as the basis of ontology and therefore (in a time-honoured sense going back to the ancient Greeks) as ‘first philosophy’. Moreover, it is a precept that he shares with those in the analytic community who espouse a realist conception of mathematical truth, that is, a conception according to which our best present state of knowledge (or best available proof-procedures) may always fall short of ascertaining or establishing the truth of any given proposition.³¹ For Badiou this applies across all subject-areas, no matter how diverse in other respects, where there is a need to respect the elementary distinction – ‘elementary’ at least from a realist perspective – between the way things stand as a matter of objective reality and the way they are considered to stand as a matter of existing opinion, rational consensus, or expert (even optimal or best attainable) human judgement. On this point at least he is in agreement with some (if not most) analytic philosophers of mathematics, logic and the formal sciences: that the truth or falsehood of statements in the relevant class is decided, quite apart from our state of knowledge, as a matter of objective or (in the jargon) verification-transcendent warrant. And if it is then asked – as very often it is by anti-realists – how we could possibly gain epistemic access to truths that by very definition might always surpass the utmost limits of human knowledge then Badiou’s response is again very much in accord with the

standard realist rejoinder. That is to say, the chief lesson that emerges from the history of advances in mathematics to date – not least through the various extensions and refinements of set-theoretical method – is that any state of knowledge at any given time might always fall short of objective truth and yet point the way to some further, as yet scarcely conceivable stage of progress. Such advances can be seen to occur solely by virtue of the fact that mathematical thought is subject to constraints – along with a sense of inventive or exploratory-creative possibilities – that enable just such a passage beyond the limits of present (even best-attainable) knowledge.

Nevertheless it needs saying that Badiou is not a ‘realist’ or ‘objectivist’ about mathematics in the sense of those terms commonly adopted by analytic philosophers. On their account, typically, one is faced with the choice between a theory of truth that places it inherently beyond the furthest power of human conceptual grasp and an alternative (anti-realist, constructivist, or intuitionist) theory that brings it safely back within epistemic reach but only the cost of renouncing any claim to objective, i.e., recognition-transcendent truth. Indeed he sees this as a downright false dilemma and one that has all too often been foisted onto Plato in the name of a typecast mathematical ‘Platonism’ presumed to entail just such a drastic (and drastically disabling) dichotomy of truth and knowledge. Hence his objection to the statement by two analytic philosophers that ‘[i]n general, the Platonists will be those who consider mathematics as the discovery of truths about structures which exist independently of the activity or thought of mathematicians’.³² After all, as Badiou does well to remind us, when Plato raises this issue most directly – as in the famous scene of instruction with the slave-boy in the *Meno* – he makes it very plain that mathematical knowledge can be acquired only through a grasp of objective (and in sense mind-independent) truths that is none the less a grasp in and by the active power of human intelligence. ‘What the metaphor of anamnesis designates is precisely that thought is never confronted by objectivities from which it is supposedly separated. The idea is always already there and would remain unthinkable were one not able to “activate” it in thought.’³³

Thus philosophers quite simply get it wrong and turn a puzzle into a full-scale paradox or epistemic crisis by approaching these topics in an abstract, disengaged way and consequently failing to achieve and communicate any such demonstrative power. Why else – one might ask – could they become so engrossed or preoccupied by problems (like that of following-a-rule or providing a justification for the axioms of elementary arithmetic) which may have a certain philosophical interest as formal

variations on an age-old sceptical theme but would scarcely command the attention of thinkers at the cutting edge of mathematical research. It is in this respect chiefly that Badiou offers an instructive contrast by actually explaining and working through a representative range of those set-theoretical problems, challenges, and stages of conceptual advance that have played such a central role in the development of his own thinking. What they mostly have in common is the character of turning obstacles and setbacks to advantage by using them as a springboard – a standing provocation or source of renewed creative and intellectual impetus – whereby to devise more powerful means of set-theoretical treatment. Such, for instance, were the various solutions put forward in response to Bertrand Russell's discovery of the paradox that followed from constructing self-referential expressions like 'the set of all sets that are not members of themselves', or (in homelier terms) 'the barber who shaves every man in town except those who shave themselves' (in which case who shaves the barber?). For Badiou, these cases should not be seen as mere distractions – however puzzling or intriguing – from the straight high road of mathematical progress but rather as a chief and indispensable means of bringing such progress about. Besides, as he remarks, they are just the sorts of problem that have often cropped up in the path of metaphysical thought or ontological enquiry ever since the issue of the one and the many was first raised by speculative thinkers like Parmenides, Zeno, Heraclitus, and Empedocles.

It is this pattern of advancement through repeated encounter with threats to its own conceptual, logical, or structural consistency that has typified set-theoretical research throughout its history to date. It thus provides Badiou with his favoured example of how thinking can achieve its most impressive discoveries in this or other fields of investigation as a result of coming up against just such blocks to its smooth development or steady progress toward an ever greater power of conceptualisation. Moreover it provides him with a paradigm instance of the *active* and *heterodox* power of thought, that is, of the way that thinking can break with received, established, or conventional habits of belief. Thus '[t]hose who practice the mathematical sciences are "forced" to proceed according to the intelligible, rather than according to the sensible or to *doxa*'.³⁴

IV

Among the most recent of these discoveries – and one that is of central importance to Badiou's whole project – is precisely the concept or procedure of 'forcing' which received its canonical formulation by the

mathematician Paul Cohen.³⁵ In brief, this involves the capacity of thought to exceed to the limits of present-best knowledge or attainable proof through a grasp of those procedures and truth-conditions that *will* or necessarily *would have* been satisfied if this or that statement, theorem, or conjecture is eventually to count as verified. Thus:

[y]ou certainly cannot straightforwardly name the elements of a generic subset, since the latter is at once incomplete in its infinite composition and subtracted from every predicate which would directly identify it in the language. But you can maintain that *if* such and such an element *will have been* in the supposedly complete generic subset, *then* such and such a statement, rationally connectable to the element in question, is, or rather will have been, correct.³⁶

That is to say, any rendition of Cohen's thesis must be couched in the future-anterior tense and also in the conditional or subjunctive mode since it has to do with what cannot yet be formally proved or verified while none the less following by the strictest necessity from certain other propositions which, if true, will be recognised as lending decisive support to the given hypothesis or theorem. And again: any gaps, inconsistencies, or contradictions in some given state of knowledge may force the invention (in a somewhat archaic but aptly ambiguous sense of that word: the creative devising but also the discovery) of a new working hypothesis. This latter is then subject to further testing, refinement, and elaboration until the stage when its validity – if and when confirmed – will retroactively endorse whatever led up to it in the way of conjectural (though none the less rigorous and faithful) truth-procedures. Cohen's thesis therefore offers Badiou a means of sharpening his own distinction between being and event, or explaining how events which exceed the utmost limits of conceptual specification can none the less bring about a decisive change in the state of mathematical knowledge. Thus: '[f]oreclosed from ontology, the event returns in the mode according to which the undecidable can only be decided therein by forcing veracity from the standpoint of the indiscernible'.³⁷

It is here precisely that the subject makes its entry since, on Badiou's account, the subject can best be defined as 'that which decides an undecidable from the standpoint of an indiscernible . . . or that which forces a veracity, according to the suspense of a truth'.³⁸ That is, the subject is here conceived as the locus of certain commitments, attachments, priorities, hypotheses, research agendas or projects, and so forth, any one of which may properly be said – in some particular, well-defined context – to constitute their very identity or mode of existence. What this involves – in the language of *Being and Event* – is a capacity to

grasp those as-yet strictly ‘indiscernible’ elements that reveal the constant (and at times critical) excess of inconsistent over consistent multiplicity, subsets over sets, parts over members, inclusion over belonging, or the ‘state of the situation’ over the situation as currently rendered according to the dominant count-as-one. As Badiou writes:

[a] subject alone possesses the capacity of indiscernment. This is also why it forces the undecidable to exhibit itself as such, on the substructure of being of an indiscernible part. It is thus assured that the impasse of being is the point at which a Subject convokes itself to a decision, because at least one multiple, subtracted from the language, proposes to fidelity and to the names induced by a supernumerary nomination the possibility of a decision without concept.³⁹

It is important to recognise that Badiou is not here adopting any kind of ultra-nominalist, constructivist, cultural-relativist, or linguistic-descriptivist stance with regard to the process by which thinking decides between the various events – or the various possible modes of fidelity to them – that confront the subject in some given context of enquiry or commitment. Nothing could be wider of the mark, as will be obvious to anyone who has read his often caustic remarks about the stultifying effect of the ‘linguistic turn’ in its manifold forms and guises. Above all he rejects the version of it to be found in Wittgenstein where the idea of language as an ultimate horizon of intelligibility goes along with the idea of mathematics as just another cultural practice or ‘form of life’ that necessarily adheres to the conventions laid down for its own ‘correct’ (i.e., communally warranted) conduct. On this view, quite simply, mathematics ‘doesn’t think’ in so far as its standards of validity and truth must be taken to consist either, as the early Wittgenstein believed, in a series of empty since merely tautologous propositions and linkages between them or, as he later came around to believing, in conformity with the ‘rules’ that generally hold sway within this or that, more-or-less expert community.

‘Here’, Badiou comments, ‘with customary radicality, Wittgenstein merely restates a thesis that is common to every variety of empiricism, as well as to all sophistry. It is one which we will never have done refuting.’⁴⁰ So we should not for one moment read the above-cited passage, or others like it, as betraying some residual lapse into a language-first, ‘continentally’ inflected (that is, hermeneutically inclined or post-structuralist) way of approach these issues. Rather we should take it as a vigorous assertion of Badiou’s claim that mathematics does indeed ‘think’, and also that the kind of thinking most aptly exemplified by certain major advances in mathematics is a kind that goes far beyond anything accountable on those or such-like terms. This is also why he rejects

Heidegger's view of 'Western metaphysics' since Plato as mortgaged to a technocratic drive for mastery over nature and humanity alike, and of the various sciences – whether 'applied' or 'pure', thus including mathematics and logic – as likewise the product of a strictly unthinking since somehow pre-destined movement of thought in that same direction. On the contrary, Badiou argues: such a failure to perceive the frequent creativity, depth, and ethical resonance of scientific thought is one that could result only from Heidegger's having been in the grip of a distorted philosophic, historical, and socio-political perspective. Moreover it had much to do with Heidegger's intense (but intensely one-sided) identification of philosophy – or authentic 'thinking' – with poetry alone among those salient 'conditions' that Badiou regards as setting the terms for its effective engagement with issues outside a narrowly self-occupied sphere.⁴¹

This recurrent inclination of philosophers to throw in their lot exclusively with one or another of those conditions – whether poetry (with Heidegger), science (with the positivists), or politics (as with Stalinist or other such attempts to dictate philosophy's ideological content) is, according to Badiou, one major cause of their having so often gone ethically, politically, and intellectually off the rails. Indeed it is just the kind of aberration that he pinpoints in his book *Ethics: an essay on the understanding of evil* as the source of much moral corruption and one that is liable – as in Heidegger's case – to infiltrate thinking even (or especially) at points of maximum concentration or intensity.⁴² Such is that particular 'romantic' temptation of thought whereby 'art is presented as the sole free form of descent from the infinite Idea to the sensible and, with Heidegger and certain fascisms, requires itself to prostrate philosophy before art'.⁴³ This is one reason why Badiou insists on the equiprimordiality – that is, the jointly and equally vital contributions – of those four conditioning factors that between them constitute philosophy's proper and enabling sphere of concern. Above all he rejects the commonplace idea (given its most philosophically articulate expression by Heidegger) that mathematics and science are somehow inimical to the kind of inventive or creative-exploratory thinking that typifies poetic thinking.

Thus '[t]he tautest, most unrelenting, and truest art of the twentieth century made an attempt to test out the notion . . . that "Newton's binomial is as beautiful as the Venus de Milo", which is to say: this art tried to seize the real with the same impersonal rigour as that of mathematics'.⁴⁴ On the one hand this conviction comes across to very striking effect in Badiou's commentary on Mallarmé in *Being and Event*.⁴⁵ On the other it is conveyed with equivalent force by his sustained and intensive meditation