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RE-THINKING INFINITY:
ALAIN BADIOU'S *BEING & EVENT*

A review of Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*. Translated by Oliver Feltham. Continuum, London, 2005. 526 pp. \$29.95 (cloth). ISBN: 0-8264-5831-9.

WORKING THROUGH Oliver Feltham's recent translation of Alain Badiou's *Being and Event*, my evaluation vacillated. I alternated between the decision that Badiou's position was strikingly original and the assessment that I had heard this all somewhere before—but with quite a bit less math. However, to read *Being and Event* without a sense of *déjà vu*—perhaps especially to do so nearly twenty years after its original French publication—would be to fail to appreciate both its novelty and its potential importance. What is most immediately striking about *Being and Event* is the way it gathers up and tightly recapitulates (sometimes in advance of itself) fifty years of French philosophy. But while this feat is remarkable in itself, it threatens to obscure the more important question: is this a repetition that manages to produce something new? Does it produce a genuine philosophical difference? And, if so, on what basis? It is my thesis that, in order to read *Being and Event* correctly, we should read it as an effort to systematically re-inscribe postmodernity within a new conception of infinity for the sake of making theoretically legible a single precarious difference: truth.

Despite his strident rhetoric, Badiou's thought is of a piece with the post-structuralist and postmodern milieu of French philosophy. All of the familiar tropes are repeated here: a critique of presence, a critique of onto-theology, a recognition of the ultimate impossibility of any totalization, an emphasis on the playful multiplicity of incommensurable language games, an acknowledgment of the importance of poetic naming, a valorization of the impossibility of the event and its future anterior promise of the to-come, an elaboration of the subject as called, split and insubstantial, an appreciation for Lacanian psychoanalysis, and a commitment to the work of addressing thought to that which is infinitely Other.

The novelty of Badiou's work lies in his attempt to re-think the infinity of the postmodern Other in terms of a multiplicity that is entirely subtracted from finitude. If it is possible to mark a difference in Badiou, it will be on the basis of this translation: the wholly Other is the purely multiple. The difference here is that, while it may be standard procedure to at least tacitly align the Other with the multiple, Badiou proposes to move beyond the simple *assignment* of alterity to multiplicity to an actual *articulation* of this multiplicity as multiple. The difficulty is that, in the absence of any unifying quality or predicate, the infinity of the pure multiple has traditionally been unthinkable as such. Attempting to think pure multiplicity has been like attempting to think pure matter without reference to any unifying form. What can thought possibly do here in relation to the purely multiple other than gesture vaguely at the negative opacity of its pure infinity? What mode of discourse could sustain a reference to pure multiplicity other than in terms of its own ruin?

Badiou's answer is set theory and his wager is that the purely multiple is sufficiently articulatable in these terms that it will be possible to suspend a doctrine of truth from it.

From its inception philosophy has recognized that only probabilities are thinkable in relation to the phenomenal mixture of unity and multiplicity. In order to maintain the possibility of truth, it has perpetually attempted to extract variously pure unities from the flux of these multiple instantiations. From Platonic forms to Kantian categories, such has been the labor of philosophy. However, wherever our sympathies may lie, it is difficult to argue against the claim that our epoch has seen the definitive ruin of every such attempt. As postmodernity has so skillfully shown, we have no meta-discourse at our disposal capable of thinking truth's intervention as a hyper-unity.

Traditionally, this failure has likewise extended to the alternative attempt to maintain truth in the thought of an infinite multiplicity subtracted from mixed phenomenality. Postmodernity pursues precisely this second option. Here, however, the ground appears even more intractable. While it may have been possible to declare the notion of truth intelligible according to a hyper-unity, every attempt to suspend truth from the chaotic infinity of pure multiplicity has slipped back into the purely unintelligible. This is the impasse of postmodern thought: the wholly Other, subtracted from conditions of phenomenal unity, can appear only as an unarticulatable interruption of that unity, as an event that shatters our horizons without prescription. While it may be granted that postmodernity maintains something of a thought of truth in the figure of the wholly Other, it must nonetheless be acknowledged that truth is here restricted to a purely negative function—it is always yet to come and it arrives only to the

ruin of what it is not.

Understanding the nature of this impasse prepares us to appreciate the novelty of Badiou's position. *Being and Event* is a Herculean attempt to re-think the whole of postmodernity by rendering articulate the purely multiple *as such* and to thereby prepare the way for a thought of truth. As we have already indicated, the mode of discourse proper to such an articulation is set theory. Set theory, Badiou argues, can successfully steer truth's course between the false dream of a meta-discourse and the infinite abyss of an unintelligible multiplicity because it re-founds the thought of infinity. This is the hinge on which *Being and Event* turns: the great philosophical secret of our epoch is that the concept of infinity has undergone a revolution.

The revolution is this: set theory renders the infinite banal. This is what postmodernity, without the lessons of set theory, fails to grasp. Famously, postmodern thought recognizes that every whole, every unity, ultimately fails in the face of the infinite. The claim of the infinite ruins every pretension to totality. As Badiou puts it, every consistent unity is haunted by an original inconsistency that it fails to order without paradox. However, everything depends on what is to be made of the infinity onto which these paradoxes of inconsistency open.

Badiou distinguishes two choices. The first choice understands infinity as that which disrupts and re-opens the closed finitude of the natural world. This notion of infinity takes up the essentially finite ontology of the Greeks as well as their conceptualization of infinity as a *potential* infinity. If the world is understood as finite and the infinite can be characterized only as potential, Badiou argues, then a concomitant reading of infinity as indicating the intervention of some variety of the ineffable "divine" is unavoidable. This type of infinity always remains equatable with divinity.

Here, infinity is articulatable only negatively as that which pulls the thread of paradox in order to unravel the finite horizon. The result is that, for every ontology of finitude, the infinite will be thinkable only according to a more or less carefully masked brand of "negative theology." For these reasons, Badiou identifies every such reading of infinity as essentially onto-theological. Without the tools for reconceptualizing infinity, postmodernity has persistently pursued this first choice and, in this light, the "theological turn" of postmodernity appears inevitable. Nonetheless, postmodernity, if it has done nothing else, has rigorously clarified our understanding of all the difficulties and aporias to be encountered along this path.

Badiou's claim is that, within our own epoch, a new conception of the infinite has

opened up in the invention of set theory. Set theory revolutionizes our understanding of infinity in two ways: (1) it makes possible the thought of an *actual* infinity, and (2) it abolishes the singular and ineffable homogeneity of the infinite by articulating an infinity of orderable infinities. For Badiou, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of this novelty. Within a set theoretical framework, infinity is no longer simply a name for the (divinely) unthinkable that punctures finitude; rather, infinity is intelligible as the very stuff out of which the world itself is woven. As actual and articulatable rather than potential and unintelligible, the concept of infinity is stripped of its classically theological orientation and set to work as the banal substance of every identifiable situation. For the first time, Badiou argues, an atheological form of infinity intervenes in thought – infinity is nothing special, infinity is all there is.

Badiou, then, via set theory, takes up and confirms the postmodern diagnosis of the impossibility of any totality. However, instead of referring to an external and abyssal beyond, infinity now refers, at least in part, to the world itself. The essential insight of postmodernity is preserved even as it is freed from its servitude to both a natural finitude and a divine infinity. As a result, the work of thought is no longer to distinguish the finite from the infinite, but to distinguish one order of infinity from another. The articulation of truth will depend on a distinction *within* infinity itself.

In postmodern thought, the infinity of truth is unarticulatable because it operates only as the interruption of being's intelligible finitude. In order to become intelligible, this gap between finitude and infinity needs to be bridged: truth and being need to be expressible in common terms. Set theory opens a way to articulating truth because it allows for the possibility of a truth to be theorized in the same idiom as ontology. Rather than attempting to render the infinity of truth finite, Badiou attempts to do precisely the opposite: he aims to render ontology infinite. Or, again: rather than attempting to think truth ontologically according to either a provisional unity or a hyper-unity, Badiou instead aims to articulate ontology in terms of the infinite multiplicity proper to truth. The key is to preserve a difference between truth and being *within* the infinity of the purely multiple.

In this connection, the logic of Badiou's apparently perverse will to translate the phenomenological richness of being into the barren abstraction of set theory becomes clear. A set theoretical ontology is undertaken explicitly for the sake of delineating the possibility of truth.

Badiou understands set theory to be uniquely qualified for the work of ontology because it is able to present a multiple *as* a multiple. Set theory, in its thought of

infinity without reference to finitude, proposes to think the pure presentation of a multiple without reference to any qualifying or finite predicate. In other words, in order for a multiple to be thought as multiple, its presentation must avoid making reference to any defined unity. Set theory, because it is axiomatic, accomplishes precisely this by prescribing rules for manipulating terms that it necessarily leaves un-defined.

Without reference to any predicate or concept, the axioms of set theory ultimately present the structure of the multiple according to a single relation: belonging. What will be articulatable of both being and truth will be articulatable in relation to this single operation. Belonging is set theory's fundamental relation because it is what designates a set as a set. It makes possible the saying of ontological presentation itself, the bare saying of what allows for a given multiple to be presented as such and such a multiple. Belonging simply and abstractly distinguishes what belongs to a set from what does not. In making this distinction, belonging both joins and disjoins being and truth. That which is discernible as belonging to a given set is what is sayable in that situation. The elements that are discernible are termed consistent multiplicities. The elements that are indiscernible according to the rules of that set are termed inconsistent multiplicities. Here, both discernible and indiscernible multiplicities belong to the order of what is infinite.

In relation to the consistency of being, the infinity of truth is an indiscernible multiplicity. The novelty of Badiou's argument is that it is possible, in view of set theory, to think this ontological inconsistency as the very thing that makes possible the consistency of being itself. In Meditation Thirteen, Badiou loosely and metaphorically sketches this relation in the following way. An infinite ontology will require four elements: (1) an already existent multiple, (2) a rule or procedure that indicates how to consistently pass from one term to the next within the set's infinity, (3) a report of the perpetual existence of a term yet to be traversed, and (4) a second existent which, because it is subtracted from the rule of consistency, can operate as a limit for that rule. Here, however, rather than totalizing the consistent set, the "limit" provided by the inconsistent multiple is what prevents the exhaustion of that rule. Or, as Badiou says, this second "Other" operates as a rule according to which the set of consistent "others" are inexhaustibly counted. The inconsistent infinity of this Other is what orders and localizes the consistent infinity of the first set. The key, then, is that, within an order of infinities, an inconsistent infinity may bear a precise relation to the very consistency of a consistent infinity.

Traditionally, a finite ontology is able to anchor a truth because the ontological situation enjoys a fundamental stability. Postmodern thought demonstrates that

a finite ontology cannot provide an anchor for truth due to the way in which its being is perpetually destabilized by the infinity of an event. Badiou concurs that the inconsistency of an event cannot provide an anchor for truth within a finite ontology. However, Badiou's position is that it *is* possible to locate a fixed point in the relation of an infinite ontology to an infinite truth at precisely the site where one actual infinity orders and localizes the other. The irony is that this anchoring point only becomes intelligible when finitude has been *entirely* abandoned as appropriate to ontology. Truth, unthinkable in terms of the finite, is potentially intelligible within a plurality of orderable infinities at the point at which one infinity sutures another.

Truth, then, belongs to the indiscernible infinity that orders and localizes the discernible infinity of a given situation. Thus, while the relation of a truth to a situation can never be anticipated from the perspective of what belongs to the consistency of the set, the inconsistency of a truth will always bear a precise relation to the situation. Faithful to postmodernity, Badiou argues that while the possibility of a truth is always introduced by a random event, this arbitrariness does not prevent the extra-ontological "logic" of an event's consequences from being potentially discernible. For Badiou, the consequences of an event are potentially intelligible not simply as a disruption of finitude, but as a supplemental reconfiguration of an already infinite situation.

Much of Badiou's project then rests on his complex elaboration of a mathematical procedure known as "forcing" whereby the infinite consequences of an event may become intelligible within the situation. For Badiou, an event is an unpredictable presentation of what is nonetheless indiscernible according to the consistency of the situation. To encounter an event is to stumble over the knot of inconsistency by which the situation's consistency is tied. In its impossible presentation, an event calls into question the consistency of the situation in which it intervenes. A truth procedure is an effort to test and extend the possible consequences of the fissure in consistency revealed by the event. A truth procedure attempts this by hypothetically forcing the "addition" of the indiscernible to the set of discernible elements. Bending the language of the situation according to the "logic" of the event's generic inconsistency, it attempts to reconfigure the rule according to which the set is ordered. In short, a truth procedure is an attempt to count what was previously uncountable. There is, however, no guarantee that a given extension of an event's consequences will result in the production of a generic truth. Only time and perseverance will tell.

Additionally, in the process of re-working the notion of infinity for the sake of truth's theoretical legibility, Badiou's argument significantly recasts many of the other postmodern givens. Here, the standard postmodern critique of presence is

radicalized in light of Badiou's mathematical articulation of pure presentation. Onto-theology is expunged in the de-divinization of infinity and the de-phenomenalization of ontology. The importance of poetic naming is taken up and re-inscribed within the framework of a truth procedure's work of forcing the addition of an indiscernible. The postmodern valorization of the event is confirmed, even as its place is more precisely defined in relation to the horizons that it interrupts. In turn, this greater precision allows for the event's future anterior promise of a truth to-come to be more militantly explored in the exigency of the present moment. And, finally, Badiou claims that this new conception of infinity makes possible a description of the called, split, and insubstantial postmodern subject as a local fragment of a truth's infinity.

Taken collectively, even this abbreviated summary of Badiou's innovations is sufficient to indicate that the potential consequences of his work are as far-reaching as they are provocative. *Being and Event* demands a reconsideration of the entire postmodern project across the whole range of disciplines in which its impact has been felt.

However, the work of assessing whether or not Badiou substantially succeeds in his attempt is immensely complex. In these few pages we have managed only to roughly sketch one possible argument for why such a project might be worth undertaking. Generating such an evaluation will necessarily require the considerable work of a whole community of interested thinkers. Nonetheless, whatever the assessment, I would argue that this much is certain: Badiou's attempt to reframe contemporary philosophy is more than sufficiently rich and inventive to substantially aid in reorienting and reinvigorating the postmodern project as a whole. His claims force a reconsideration of both where we are and where we wish to go.

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