

Uncategorical imperatives

Adorno, Badiou and the ethical turn

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The last decade or so has seen a surprising transposition in the dominant tonalities of literary and cultural discourse. Questions of conscience and obligation, of recognition and respect, of justice and the law, which not so long ago would have been dismissed as the residue of an outdated humanism, have returned to occupy, if not centre stage, then something pretty close to it. The so-called 'ethical turn' in deconstruction, the popularity of Emmanuel Levinas's thought, the surge of interest among Lacanian theorists in such matters as 'radical evil', Pauline *agapé*, and Kierkegaardian faith, are only the most obvious manifestations of this trend.

But compared with earlier shifts of theoretical emphasis, there is something odd about this turn to ethical issues. If one recalls the takeoff of post-modern theory, back in the late 1970s, there was an unmistakable sense of exhilaration in the air. The decentring of subjectivity, the unleashing of the forces of textuality, corporeality and desire, the jettisoning of the critic's role as guardian of values, were experienced as a liberation. Fashionable thinkers were thrilled to lose themselves amidst proliferating rhizomes, to ride the roller coaster of the will-to-power. They eagerly nodded assent when Foucault declared that 'experience ... has the task of "tearing" the subject from itself in such a way that it is no longer the subject as such, or that it is completely "other" than itself so that it may arrive at its annihilation, its dissociation.'¹ The mood of the moment was '*jouissance* now, pay later'.

By contrast, there is often something rather reluctant, even shamefaced, about the recent 'turn to ethics'. In the introduction to a recent American essay collection with that title², the editors try to make the best of it:

Ethics is back in literary studies, as it is in philosophy and political theory, and indeed the very critiques of universal man and the autonomous human subject that had initially produced resistance to

ethics have now generated a crossover among these various disciplines that sees and does ethics 'otherwise'. The decentering of the subject has brought about a recentering of the ethical.

But the disparate contents of the volume, from John Guillory on the ethics of reading, via Beatrice Hanssen on Fanon and the 'Other', to Doris Sommer on 'attitude', belie this optimistic account of the transition. Many of the essays betray a distinct unease or confusion about the scope and validity of ethical discourse, even while registering an obscure sense of its necessity. As Judith Butler frankly admits, at the start of her Nietzschean response to Levinas:

I do not have much to say about why there is a return to ethics, if there is one, in recent years, except to say that I have for the most part resisted this return, and that what I have to offer is something like a map of this resistance and its partial overcoming.

Chantal Mouffe states her misgivings even more bluntly, as she complains about 'the triumph of a sort of moralizing liberalism that is increasingly filling the void left by the collapse of any project of real political transformation'. It's clear that all the new talk of responsibility and justice is far from following smoothly from a poststructuralist-inspired contextualism, from the critique of the 'ideal, autonomous and sovereign subject'. It's not so easy to do ethics 'otherwise'. This is not to say, of course, that the earlier aversion to moral discourse was unjustified. But its motivation was far from clear – especially, one might argue, to those who most strongly expressed it.

Readers looking for a more philosophically reflective account of the grounds for scepticism about moral discourse could do worse than open *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, the transcript of a lecture course which Adorno gave at Frankfurt University in 1963.* Like Adorno's other lecture courses, which will eventually make up sixteen volumes of the *Nachgelassene*

Schriften, Problems of Moral Philosophy is dotted with personal remarks and humorous asides. We sense an aspect of the man less prominent in his published writings. In the concluding lecture of the series Adorno recalls: 'When the founders of the Humanist Union invited me to become a member, I replied that "I might possibly be willing to join if your club had been called an inhuman union, but I would not join one that calls itself "humanist"':

The proximity of Adorno's sentiment to the 'anti-humanism' of the French thought of recent decades is intriguing. But, at the same time, the difference in self-understanding can't be ignored. From Foucault's notorious proclamation of the 'death of man' to Lyotard's late essay collection, *The Inhuman*, French anti-humanism was driven, ostensibly at least, by a sense of the theoretical unviability of traditional models of the reflective and responsible subject. In Adorno's case, the motivation is different: namely, a *moral* concern that the rhetoric of humanism now 'reifies and falsifies' the very issues it was originally meant to address. For Adorno, this does not mean, of course, that an anti-humanist stance would solve the difficulty.

The obsolescence of morality

Problems of Moral Philosophy is essentially an exploration of this dilemma through a sustained discussion of Kant's ethical thought. Kant features throughout these lectures as exemplary, though not as a model to be emulated. Rather, he is the thinker who pursued the theory of morality with the unflinching determination required to bring its antinomies to light. Readers of *Negative Dialectics*, for which this lecture course, like others from the early 1960s, is a kind of preparatory study, will be able to guess the thrust of Adorno's account. Kant's sense that there is an 'aspect of our destiny as human beings which goes beyond mere existence' vies with his proto-positivist tendency to prune back the aspirations of philosophical enquiry for the sake of avoiding contradiction. His emphasis on rational autonomy is undermined by the ultimate reduction of moral obligation to a brute, unquestionable fact. Kant's philosophy, Adorno concludes, 'starts off by postulating freedom and extracts an immense pathos from it, but in the process of developing its meaning, this freedom dwindles to the point of extinction and his philosophy ends up by dispensing with freedom entirely'.

Of course, for Adorno, these paradoxes are not contingent features of Kant's thinking, but arise from the very probity with which he responds to his historical context. And this context is fundamentally defined by the obsolescence of morality as such. 'It is only where our universe is limited', Adorno argues

that something like Kant's celebrated freedom can survive. In the immeasurably expanded world of experience and the infinitely numerous ramifications of the processes of socialization that this world of experience imposes on us, the possibility of freedom has sunk to such a minimal level that we can or must ask ourselves very seriously whether any scope is left for our moral categories.

To put this another way, the very notion of morality presupposes an – at least relatively – independent sphere of personal interaction, where ethical problems can be addressed through the initiative of individuals, and where the consequences of our behaviour towards others can be more or less reliably anticipated. But in the administered world we can no longer assume the existence of such a sphere.

Reading *Problems of Moral Philosophy* one is struck again by the extent to which Adorno's stress on the opaque, unmappable complexity of social and economic processes anticipates central themes of post-modernism and, more recently, of globalization theory. The kernel of truth in such characterizations seems apt to explain the unease of the recent 'turn to ethics'. Doubtless, this turn has been honourably motivated – by a need somehow to come to terms with the moral catastrophes of the twentieth century, by a desire to find a language in which to address a global situation of pervasive violence, inequality and suffering. We cannot help but be haunted by a sense of living in a morally unjustifiable world. Indeed, on some accounts, the mere standard of living of the Western democracies may be a violation of the categorical imperative. But we also feel our individual powerlessness and the overwhelming of our reflective capacity to determine specific moral norms. In this situation, the appeal of an ethics such as that of Levinas, which appears to bypass the dilemmas of moral reflection through a phenomenology of irrecusable obligation, is understandable. But, of course, as soon as Levinas, almost as an afterthought, moves beyond the imperatives of the 'face-to-face' relation, and acknowledges the issue of justice, of the existence of the 'Other of the Other', then all the old problems return.

* Theodor W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Schröder, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000. 224 pp., £ 45.00 hb., £15.99 pb., 0 7456 1941 X hb., 0 7456 2865 6 pb.

In this context, one turns eagerly to Alain Badiou's recently published book, *Ethics: A Essay on the Understanding of Evil*.^{*} For Badiou's thought, though much concerned with ethical issues, still nurtures the anti-humanist impulses of the 1960s. Born in Morocco in 1937, and educated at the École Normale Supérieure, Badiou was at first a follower of Sartre, but later became part of the intellectual circle around the mandarin journal *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, whose theoretical lodestars were Lacan and Althusser. Like a number of his contemporaries, Badiou sought to sustain the impetus of May '68 through the idiosyncratic Maoism of the *Union des jeunes communistes de France (marxistes-léninistes)*, a group in which he played a leading role, until it finally disbanded in the late 1970s. He also taught for many years at the 'experimental' university outpost of Paris VIII, where Deleuze and Lyotard were once on the faculty. But in 1999 – in a very French transfiguration – he became head of the philosophy department at the École Normale Supérieure.

High fidelity

Badiou opens his *Ethics* by vigorously defending the honour of Foucault and Althusser, and venting his deep hostility to the general resurgence of ethical discourse, in France and elsewhere. The first part of the book contains a polemical onslaught on the contemporary discourse of human rights, as well as an attack on Levinas's phenomenology, which is often regarded as an alternative to it. But the aim of the book is not simply demolition. In the second part of his little treatise, Badiou proposes an alternative ethics, what he calls an 'ethics of truths'. And he concludes by elaborating a definition of evil which, he claims, differs radically from the pious denunciations of humanistic discourse. Let us look first at Badiou's positive conception of ethics.

To behave ethically, for Badiou, is to remain faithful to a moment of revelation or insight, and to pursue whatever line of thought and action is required to sustain this fidelity. Such disclosures of truth can occur, on his account, in four fundamental domains: politics, science, art and love. They do not transform and dynamize a pre-existent knowing and acting subject. Rather, it is the irruption of an always 'singular' truth through the tissue of everyday 'opinion' which first brings a subject – individual or collective

– into being. Hence, for Badiou, there is no universal human subject. There are a plurality of subjects, called on to sustain the particular starbursts of truth through which they are constituted, to cleave faithfully to them against the insistent tug of the merely animal side of human existence.

Badiou goes on to outline three figures of evil. First, evil can consist in the *terror* produced by commitment to a simulacrum of truth. This occurs when the supposed breakthrough of truth is related to the 'closed particularity of an abstract set' rather than to the indeterminate – and hence potentially universal – 'void' which it reveals at the heart of a specific situation. Thus the National Socialist 'revolution' arose from and was addressed to the German *Volk*; it did not raise a claim to universal significance by negating the particularity of the situation from which it emerged. Second, evil can consist in the *betrayal* of a truth, a lack of the nerve and commitment required to pursue its implications to the limit. Finally, evil occurs in the form of *disaster* when the power of a truth is absolutized – in other words, when there is a failure to acknowledge that the situation in which a truth has emerged cannot be rendered transparent, that a truth-process can never fully name and appropriate its own contingent context.

Viewed from this perspective, what is wrong with the contemporary resurgence of ethical discourse? Formally speaking, the attack which takes up the first half of *Ethics* can be seen to derive from Badiou's account of the singularity of truths. More concretely, Badiou expatiates vehemently on his conviction that the contemporary discourses of human rights, multiculturalism, and respect for the alterity of the other, are merely the ideology with which the white, affluent West seeks to assure its own good conscience, whilst continuing to ravage and exploit the rest of the world. Badiou is at his strongest in pointing to the inconsistencies of a facile multiculturalism, the pluralism of the food court and the shopping mall, which wilts in the face of any genuine expression of cultural hostility to liberal values. He also rightly points out that Levinas's thought is abused when enlisted to support the 'contemporary catechism of goodwill with regard to "other cultures"', since at its core lies a religious experience of transcendent alterity which cuts across all social and cultural difference. What is more puzzling is Badiou's wholesale condemnation of ethics as a 'pious discourse', and indeed the posture of

^{*} Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward, Verso, London and New York, 2001. 217 pp., £18.00 hb., 1 85984 297 6.

militant atheism ('There is no God') which he adopts when pronouncing his verdicts.

I suggested earlier that, for Badiou, fidelity to a truth event requires the capacity to go against one's natural, animal propensities. But this was to understate the extremity of the contrast which he draws. On the one hand we have the 'varied and rapacious flux of life', on the other man's capacity to become what Badiou quaintly calls 'an Immortal', through participation in the irruption of a truth. Or, as he puts it:

The 'some-one' thus caught up in what attests that he belongs to the truth-process as one of its foundation-points is simultaneously *himself*, nothing other than himself, a multiple singularity recognizable among all others, and *in excess of himself*, because the uncertain course of fidelity *passes through him*, transfixes his singular body and inscribes him, from within time, in an instant of eternity.

Now, it's hard to see in what sense this perspective could be described as 'a-religious'. Indeed, apart from the fact that the subject is interpellated into being by the irruption of a singular truth rather than by the ethical encounter with the Other, the structure of Badiou's thought is remarkably similar to that of Levinas. Both set up an exaggerated contrast between the *conatus* of the human being as a natural being, and the irruption of an event which breaks the cycle of self-preservation, constituting the subject of a process which, as Badiou says, 'has nothing to do with the "interests" of the animal' and 'has eternity for its destiny'. Furthermore, Badiou berates the 'ideology of human rights' not for its idealistic conception of the person, but for its complacent commitment to human happiness, and a 'negative and victimary definition of man' which 'equates man with a simple mortal animal'. In short, it seems the problem with conventional ethics is that it forgets about man's immortal soul.

This is a contestable diagnosis. Badiou claims that the discourse of human rights splits the supposedly 'universal Subject of rights' between 'the haggard animal exposed on our television screens', on the one hand, and the 'sordid self-satisfaction' of 'the good-Man', the 'white-Man', on the other. But while his polemic may capture a certain offensive Western mindset, what facilitates such arrogance is not, as Badiou suggests, the fact that human rights discourse reduces man to the 'simple reality of his living being'. On the contrary, what Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says about human beings is that they are 'endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood'. True, the Declaration goes on to mention various social rights (though not to the extent that most left-

wingers would wish). But the philosophical nub of the Declaration, which everything else subserves, is the notion of human 'dignity and the free development of ... personality' (Article 22).

So Badiou is wrong to affirm that 'the ideological framework of "ethics" ... equates man with a simple mortal animal.' No mere mortal animal is endowed with reason, conscience or personality. What's more, it's hard to see much difference between the conception of humanity implicit in the UN Declaration and Badiou's assertion – which he takes to be a *counter-claim* – that 'Man *thinks*, ... *Man* is a tissue of truths', and that it is this which allows him to participate in 'the Intemporal'. Both conceptions are clearly secularized offshoots of the Judeo-Christian tradition – and none the worse for that. Indeed, if anything, Badiou's unabashed rhetoric of 'eternity', 'immortality' and 'fidelity' displays its religious origins more openly ('fidelity' was, after all, a key category in the thought of Gabriel Marcel). One of the surprising things about *Ethics*, then, is how Badiou can be so blind to this, priding himself on the contrast between the debased piety of 'humanitarian prattle' and his own militant atheism.

But this is not the only thing Badiou overlooks. For his onslaught on the discourse of human rights is curiously one-sided. No one doubts the murderous hypocrisy with which the Western powers, led by the USA, have invoked the language of human rights in recent years. But 'human rights' have also been a rallying call for many activists around the globe. In the form of the Helsinki Accords, they were a major focus for the East European opposition in the years leading up to 1989. They were equally important tactically for Latin America's struggle against the dictatorships, and continue to provide a vital *political* point of leverage for many indigenous populations, not to mention the Tibetans, the Burmese, the Palestinians... The United States opposes the idea of an International Court of Human Rights, aware that members of its own armed forces would be among the first to be arraigned before it.

But if Badiou neglects the ambivalent potential of human rights discourse, he is equally out of touch with the ambiguities of his own position. The twentieth century has made us all too familiar with the posture displayed in *Ethics*: contempt for the banality and complacency of a society devoted to commerce and material well-being, a heroic contrast between everyday communication, dismissed as the circulation of a mindless mulch of 'opinion', and the irruption of politically galvanizing truths. Badiou recognizes the affinities with his political counter-pole, but, as

we have seen, tries to defuse them by suggesting that fascism ties its ‘simulacrum’ of truth to a specified group: ‘Every invocation of blood and soil, of race, of custom, of community, works directly against truths; and it is this very collection [*ensemble*] which is named as the enemy in the ethic of truths.’ But if, as Badiou repeatedly stresses, truths are singular, why should their embedding in a community be a problem? Indeed, since there is no general truth of ethics, but only an ethics of truths, why should we worry about the ‘war and massacre’ which fidelity to some truths may require?

On this issue Badiou equivocates. Sometimes he talks about ‘the situated advent of a singular truth’, and sometimes about the ‘singular penetration’ of truths through the fabric of opinion. In the second case, of course, it is entirely possible for a truth, whose context of emergence is necessarily unique, to embody that ‘abstract universality and eternity of truths’ which Badiou invokes elsewhere. Along with this metaphysical prevarication goes a moral one. The target of Badiou’s polemic, as we have seen, is the ‘universal Subject’ of human rights. But when he comes to specify what would be wrong with the use of violence to propagate a (simulacrum of) truth, Badiou’s response is that,

However hostile to a truth he might be, in the ethic of truths every ‘some-one’ is always represented as capable of becoming the Immortal that he is. So we may fight against the judgements and opinions he exchanges with others for the purpose of corrupting every fidelity, but not against his *person* – which, under the circumstances, is insignificant and to which, in any case, every truth is ultimately addressed.

But if every truth is addressed universally to human beings as ‘persons’, whose moral and physical integrity must be respected, then this is surely the ethical bottom line. We can shrug our shoulders when Badiou claims that ‘There is not, in fact, one single Subject, but as many subjects as there are truths, and as many subjective types as there are procedures of truths.’

The fact is that Badiou wants Kantian intransigence, without paying the price of a formal universalism. He longs for a truth which would be ‘the material course traced, within the situation, by the eventual supplementation’, and yet which would be accessible to everyone. In his book on St Paul, published a few years after *Ethics*, Badiou writes, ‘The process of a truth is only universal to the extent that an immediate subjec-

tive recognition of its singularity supports it, as its point in the real.’³ But while *immediate* recognition of a transformative truth such as that of the risen Christ may spread for a variety of reasons, other contingent factors will eventually block that expansion. A truth can only claim genuine universality if it is mediated by the human capacity to talk and reason. But Badiou dismisses ‘communicative sociality’ for the exaltation of being ‘*directly* seized by fidelity’.

The situation which Adorno diagnosed nearly forty years ago may help explain, but does not excuse, the inconsistencies of Badiou’s conception of ethics. Indeed, the vulnerable, precarious status of ethical discourse, overshadowed by what Adorno terms ‘the overpowering machinery of external reality’, would seem to call for the very opposite of Badiou’s bragadocio. At one point in his final lecture, Adorno remarks:

If you were to press me to follow the example of the Ancients and make a list of cardinal virtues, I would probably respond cryptically by saying that I could think of nothing except for modesty.

Modesty, however, is not Badiou’s strong suit.

Commissioned in an introductory series for schools, *Ethics* belongs to a genre of philosophical pamphleteering which, for good or ill, has no counterpart in the English-speaking world. It’s the product of an intellectual culture which prizes sweeping assertiveness, rhetorical daring, and the ability to present one’s take on the world in sonorous metaphysical garb, but which pays scant regard to the skill of foreseeing objections. In short, it could scarcely have been penned anywhere today except within the confines of the *boulevard périphérique*. This defiant provinciality gives Badiou’s thought an unmistakable pathos, even grandeur. *Ethics* is guaranteed to make many older readers feel quite nostalgic. But, sadly perhaps, the world has changed – and we should be wary of the current drive to package Badiou as the latest *maître à penser*, the new apostle to the Anglophone gentiles.

Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, Semiotext(e), New York, 1991, p. 31.
2. Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, Rebecca L. Walkowitz, eds, *The Turn to Ethics*, Routledge, New York and London, 2000.
3. Alain Badiou, *Saint-Paul. La fondation de l’universalisme*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1997, p. 23.