

Alain Badiou

Conditions.

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Alain Badiou has recently begun to receive wider recognition among Anglophone philosophers. In the essay 'Some Versions of Platonism: Mathematics and Ontology According to Badiou', Christopher Norris suggests that Badiou's ambition and speculative range have prevented him from receiving attention from analytically trained philosophers. Moreover, Badiou rejects nearly every contemporary philosophical orthodoxy. In his magnum opus, *Being and Event*, Badiou describes the ontological structure and conditions of 'the event'. In *Conditions*, he deals with what he considers the four chief procedures of human experience: poetry, mathematics, politics, and love, that provide the material for philosophy. According to Badiou, these dimensions of experience make up philosophy's primary 'conditions', or the necessary contexts in which its motivating interests and values are articulated.

In Part 1, Chapter 1, Badiou claims that philosophy today must return to itself. It must reject both historicism and a diffused sophistry that Badiou sees as characteristic of our era. He claims that '[w]e are bearing witness to a second anti-Platonic requital, for contemporary "philosophy" is a sort of generalized sophistry, which incidentally is lacking neither in talent nor in grandeur. Language games, deconstruction, weak thought, radical heterogeneity, *differend* and differences, the ruin of Reason, promotion of the fragment, discourse reduced to shreds: all of this argues in favour of a sophistic line of thinking, and puts philosophy in a deadlock' (20). In Chapter 2, he offers his own definition of philosophy: 'As a fiction of knowledge, philosophy imitates the matheme. As a fiction of art, it imitates the poem. As the intensity of an act, it is like a love without object. Addressed to all so that all may be in seizing the existence of truth, it is like a political strategy with no stakes in power' (23).

Chapter 4 deals with 'The philosophical recourse to the poem', the first of the aforementioned four conditions. Badiou claims that the famous judgment on poetry, delivered by Plato in the *Republic*, must be assessed. It is the interruption of the sovereignty of myth; it is the strategy for an attack on tradition. Not the refusal of poetry as we can easily understand with the deconstruction of the *Republic* as a whole, i.e. taking the dialogue as a whole, in all its complexity. Once the *Republic* is viewed as an attack on the existing educational apparatus in Greece, its overall logic becomes clear. In this regard Badiou writes, 'With Parmenides, the poetic form is essential.... Philosophy, however, commences only with a desacralization' (36). The first separation of poetry and philosophy happens with Plato. With Heidegger, by contrast, the Parmenidean epoch

returns: ‘Heidegger showed that it was neither always possible nor always just to establish a distance to poetry using the Platonic procedure of banishment. Philosophy is sometimes obliged to open up to the poem in a more dangerous fashion’ (39). Today, according to Badiou, poets would have us re-separate philosophy and poetry, leaving Heidegger behind. In this context, philosophy’s task is to rethink its liaison with poetry: to think the relation neither in terms of Platonic banishment, nor in terms of Heideggerian suture, nor with the classificatory concern of an Aristotle or a Hegel. Badiou’s discussion of the relation between philosophy and poetry is amply illustrated with references to Mallarmé and Rimbaud.

Chapter 7 deals with the second condition, mathematics. Badiou claims that ‘mathematics has been ever since Greek origins, a *condition* for philosophy, mathematics is recognized as having a certain capacity for thinking first principle, or for the knowledge of being and of truth’ (93). Nevertheless, it is entirely separate from the questions, or questioning, proper to philosophy. In Plato’s divided line, the equivalence of mathematics and *dianoia* shows that mathematics plays an important preliminary role in education. But Badiou also notes that mathematics is *metaxu*, i.e. an in-between, midway between *doxa* and *episteme*. Mathematics and philosophy have traditionally been so entwined that Kant described the mythical name of Thales as the origin of both mathematics and philosophy. The post-Kantian era, by contrast, has sought to disentangle philosophy and mathematics. From this perspective, the history of Western philosophy looks like a continuum with Plato at one end and Hegel at the other. Plato exiles poetry and glorifies the matheme, while Hegel, the inventor of the romantic gesture in philosophy, does the opposite. In truth, Hegel’s view is more complex. In his discussion of the relation between philosophy and mathematics in *The Science of Logic*, he argues that the success of mathematics is nevertheless counterbalanced by an absence of justification and conditioned by an essential obscurity. Hegel’s philosophy, with its concept of infinite, has the pretensions of being a superior mathematics. Badiou suggests that ‘the only royal way I know to arrive at a more authentic formulation of the problem is to examine the link between mathematics and philosophy’ (98).

In Chapter 10, ‘Philosophy and Politics’, Badiou discusses the concept of community and asks whether the political is in retreat today. He answers that ‘everything rests here on the link between community and truth, and therefore, ultimately, on the link between philosophy and politics. The displacement consists in this: the fatal aspect of the communist idea was that it presupposed the co-belonging of the community and the truth of the collective. In communism, community became the coming realization, in politics, of the collective as truth’ (150). Contra those who say that the ideal city is a myth, in the *Republic*, Socrates suggests that when politics is taken as a form of thought—and obviously only such a politics is of interest to philosophy—then the norm of politics does not lie in *objective* possibility. That is to say that philosophy and politics are apparently incompatible. In any case, Plato maintains that the practical execution of politics, *praxis*, is less important than its theoretical articulation, *lexis*. The relation of

philosophy to politics is therefore indirect and blind. It does not follow, however, that philosophy must abandon emancipatory politics. Badiou describes his vision of the different relation between philosophy and politics as follows: 'In the parliamentarianism of the West, as in the despotic bureaucracies of the East, politics is in the last instance confounded with a state management. But the philosophical effects of this confusion are opposed. In the first case, where politics ceases to come within the province of truth, the prevailing philosophy is skeptical and relativist. In the second case, where politics prescribes a "true State", the prevailing philosophy is monist and dogmatic' (169).

Toward the end of the chapter, Badiou considers the notion of equality, which is not properly a political designation: 'equality can be a philosophical name for the compossibilization of emancipatory politics. Because equality neither designates nor presumes the advent of a totality. And because it has been possible ever since Cantor to think equality in the element of the infinite' (173). Cantor established the importance of one-to-one correspondence between sets, and defined infinite and well ordered sets; in fact Cantor's theorem implies the existence of an 'infinity of infinities'. According to Badiou, the merit of Cantor's invention is to have pluralized the infinite. In the social and political context the concept of equality can and 'must be secured in the absence of any economic connotations (equality of objective conditions, of status and of opportunities)' (173). For Badiou, the link between equality and existence forms the matrix underlying all philosophical thinking on human emancipation. Do not forget that mathematics is a precondition for Badiou's ontology. Obviously, however, there are difficulties at the level of practical application.

In Chapter 11, 'What is Love?', Badiou tries to separate Eros from every dialectic of the *eteros*. He defines love as a *production of truths*: 'a process that arranges immediate experiences of the like, without the law of these experiences being decipherable from within them. We might also say: the experience of the loving subject, as the matter of love, does not constitute *knowledge* of love' (182). Love, for Badiou, implies the applicability of number to its procedures: One, Two, Infinity. It is nothing 'other than an exacting series of enquiries into the disjunction, into the Two, which, in the retroaction of the encounter, turns out to have always been one of the laws of the situation' (189). Love is the advent of the Two, and consequently is the guardian of the universality of the true.

In the end, some questions arise. Having broken with historicism, how can Badiou entwine mathematics and philosophy in the way he wants? After all, mathematics has a history. Also problematic is the status of transcendental questioning in Badiou's work. His four conditions look like Kantian or Husserlian transcendental ones. But he insists that they are *objective* and that the 'transcendentals' that structure worlds are not *linguistic* structures. How is it possible to avoid the conclusion that transcendentals are structures of linguistic or conventional practice? That said, this interesting and innovative book will provoke study and reflection for years to come.

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